Laura Mulvey’s influential «Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema» has been the object of study and criticism in the last few years. In her article Mulvey explored the position of both male and female spectators in classical cinema, exposing the tendency of classical texts to deny woman a place from which to identify with the characters and experience pleasure in the viewing process. She revealed that the texts strived to oppress woman in order to establish by opposition the supremacy of the male gaze. Such a scheme presupposed a process of sexual definition based on systems of opposition male/female, where the existence of the female gave sense to the male. This paper attempts to show that such a scheme presented by Mulvey may conceal an implicit concession to essentialist positions, and that the forces of pleasure and identification do not necessarily follow a system of sexual difference based on oppositions.

The aim of this paper will be to discuss the attempt of a very specific kind of feminist film criticism, here briefly represented by Laura Mulvey’s article «Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema» (1989)\(^1\), to combine political and theoretical concerns. Such an attempt leads this criticism to partially disguise its process of counteracting the effort of those decodifying agents—the readers of books, the viewers of films—who help create the texts through their acts of interpretation of a symbolic system, a language, in the process helping patriarchy reaffirm its oppression. This paper will also attempt to analyse how some of the phenomena Mulvey describes, and the conclusions they lead us to reach, can also be found in the study of masculinity; and that they may reveal a state of oppression affecting men which is very similar to that she denounces, a fact which should be added to the phenomena she explains in her article.

The paper includes an introduction to the semiotic branch of feminist criticism, within which I later place Laura Mulvey’s influential article. I then attempt a description of the theoretical points in the article, where I argue that a certain essentialist position may be discerned, revealing that the basic idea leading the article to adopt such a position is its adherence to sexual definition through schemes of opposition. The paper goes on to attempt a deconstruction of such essentialist position through an analysis of Stanley Kubrick’s Full Metal Jacket (1987). This film shows how a system of sexual definition based on relationships of opposition can be altered if the poles which are made to oppose each other turn out to possess different features from those the system attributes to them. In this case the soldiers in the film are not presented as privileged or potent, but as oppressed,

\(^1\) I will make reference to the 1989 version of the article, which appears in Visual and Other Pleasures. However, the original article was published in 1975 by the journal Screen under the title «Visual Pleasure in the Narrative Cinema».
therefore altering any system of sexual definition based on opposition to a privileged centre. After the analysis of the film the paper outlines a very modest proposal of sexual definition, one not governed by relationships of opposition.

In order to make my points clear I will first try to follow the same paths Mulvey’s description of cinematographic spectatorship follows. I must first of all say that the ideas and tendencies I will discuss in this paper are not common to all types of feminist criticism, and that they cannot be attributed to a specific branch or school of feminism either. Rather they are notions which I have found in an article of a particular author, Laura Mulvey. My use of feminist sources may therefore be subject to criticism, since I tend to concentrate on just one work, but I am willing to accept it since my only purpose is to offer my point of view on some theoretical aspects which I find stimulating, not to propose a completely consistent and alternative theory of feminist criticism. The restricted scope of my feminist sources may be balanced by the great influence which Laura Mulvey’s article has had in cinematic accounts of spectatorship and feminist discussions of classical cinema. Her theories have been adopted first and later revised by a great number of film critics. It is within this tradition of revisions of Mulvey’s theories² that this paper should be humbly placed.

I will therefore start by making some brief remarks on various writings related to the corpus of semiotic feminist criticism, which will be helpful in order to understand Mulvey’s theoretical context. For feminism in general, society is governed by a set of rules whose unifying force is their consistent tendency to create differences between men and women. These differences are turned into pretexts for structuring society in a manner which perpetuates inequality. The representatives of semiotic feminist criticism introduce a new element into the discussion. For them, such a patriarchal system not only creates differences in society, it also pervades the language of every individual: the basis of the conceptual structures through which we think is eminently patriarchal. Semiotic feminist criticism starts its theoretical course from the condemnation of traditional psychoanalytic accounts of the psychosexual development of the individual. Freud and Lacan had devised totalising hypotheses about the process of construction and socialisation of the individual, but they tended to disregard the position of woman in those hypotheses. Julia Kristeva’s work is an attempt to expose such a state of affairs and to propose a new scheme where the feminine can be accommodated. Adopting Lacan’s notion of the Symbolic as the site of language, recognition of the other and socialisation, she states that woman can never be present in such a stage since the feminine represents precisely the opposite. She places woman in the preoedipal stage, previous to the mirror stage which leads the subject to the recognition of the world and society. Kristeva calls this previous stage the Semiotic: it is constituted by signification gaps, abundance of non-expressive elements, an inconsistent articulation, etc. The Semiotic is what threatens to disturb and subvert the Symbolic, the ever-present tendency to destroy language and signification therefore returning to the perfect primitive state of the subject’s communion with the rest of the world (Duchêne 1988, 84-87).

Kristeva sees woman as what eludes representation, what tends to stay outside naming and ideologies, and accepts that this is a strategic definition: an attempt to ascribe the ne-

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² Recently, for example, both Byars (1991) and Stacey (1994) attempt to reindicate the relevance of the feminine gaze and spectator in classical cinema. See also Rodowick (1991), Studdar (1988), and Cowie (1984), who hold very similar views to the ones proposed by Flax (1990) and that I will discuss later.
gativity of the marginal to woman in order to destroy the phallocentric system which places woman as marginal in the first place (Moi 1988, 163). Consequently, language is not a perfect system of communication, not a group of signs where the relationships between signifiers and signifieds are univocal and unproblematic. Language is above all a process where meaning is constantly created, a process which at times is not able to prevent a certain dissemination of meaning. Here Kristeva comes close to the ideas held by Bakhtin and Derrida, defending the notion of meaning as always created by context and therefore always unstable (Moi 1988, 151-156).

Luce Irigaray, another member of the French feminist group, shares Kristeva’s views on the place occupied by woman in a preoedipal stage. Her theory differs from Kristeva’s mainly in its stress on the potential of feminine sexuality to subvert the symbolic system created by patriarchy. She defines feminine sexuality as an extension of the different characteristics of woman. For her, woman is multiple, always changing, never remaining the same for very long; woman is flexible and diffuse as opposed to the rigid nature and accuracy of man. She sees feminine sexuality as self-sufficient and proposes homosexuality as a way of fighting the supremacy of the phallus in society, a kind of sexuality not based on possession but on freedom. Hélène Cixous repeats the arguments offered by Kristeva and Irigaray and their conclusions but seems to emphasise the role of language as a valid tool for the expression of women’s difference and subversive potential. For her, a feminist text must necessarily be an attack on the Symbolic, it must oppose patriarchy even in its use of vocabulary or its syntactical structures: it must present a certain alteration of commonly accepted codes and constitute a difficult task for the traditional/patriarchal reader (Duchê 1988, 87-93). Cixous shows a renewed concern with the workings of language and the Derridean concept of différence. For her, meaning is never present to us through language, an absence which she links to her notion of femininity. She connects sexuality and textuality and proposes the application of notions of feminine sexual multiplicity and diffusion to a textual practice. Her defence of such a deconstructive textual activity is nevertheless always accompanied by a presentation of the activity of writing as a feminine essence, but she seems to understand these contradictions as part of her illogical, anti-patriarchal strategy (Moi 1988, 102-126). The existence of this internal contradiction between the disintegration of meaning/system and the defence of a certain essentialism will be discussed in this paper through a reading of Mulvey’s theory, which I will explain in the following paragraphs.

Regardless of the problematic areas the semiotic branch of feminist criticism may have, the value of the theories it has produced and the increasing consciousness they have brought about are unquestionable. Semiotic feminist criticism has opened the way for a profound study of the role of women in society, and has managed to introduce the issue of women in literary and academic circles, therefore gaining strong support and prestige in a world traditionally dominated by males. Laura Mulvey’s «Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema» (1989) can be inscribed within this tradition of semiotic feminist criticism. The ideas informing Laura Mulvey’s description of spectatorship may be analysed, among other things, as an attempt to avoid defining woman as essence, because this definition entails admitting that the idea of woman can be known, and this would provide the opponents of this particular kind of feminism with the clues they need in order to dismantle its political tactics—the fight for the rights of woman. It would force Mulvey’s description to ascribe to woman a series of characteristics which might be used by patriarchy against women. Affirming that woman has an essence entails confirming that woman can be known through direct experience of such an essence, which would dismantle the idea that woman is a construction of the system through textual—linguistic—signs and that in such a pro-
cess of construction the place given to woman is secondary whereas man is granted the controlling, creative, oppressive role. A construction can be known but the fact that it can be attributed to patriarchy secures the inaccessibility of the decoder to something which can be proximate to the nature of woman. A construction is, by definition, something artificial, not derived from the real nature of things³.

An idea coherent with the previous argumentation is the textual attempt to present woman as mysterious, as unclassifiable. It fits Laura Mulvey’s assertion that the processes of investigation carried out by men on woman are a way of denying her individuality and forcing her to return to the symbolic—the law of the father. For her, classical cinema exemplifies how the male hero tries to obtain information about the female characters in the films, and then uses that privileged, knowledgeable position to oppress them, a parallel process to the one carried out by the viewer during the decodification/understanding of the film. Mulvey uses psychoanalytic criticism and ideas in order to analyse the processes at work in the apprehension of a filmic narrative and their implications for women.

Woman is usually presented as icon, as spectacle which stops the course of the action in moments of erotic contemplation. Man always appears in control of the film, as representative of power, and as focus for the identification of the spectator. The meaning of woman is finally sexual difference, the threat of castration which men try to counteract by means of fetishistic scopophilia—turning woman into a fetish so that she stops being dangerous—and sadistic voyeurism—looking at woman in order to denisify her, by investigating her, finding out her mystery and then punishing her (1989, 14-26). Mulvey’s pervading idea is that the construction of cinematic texts relies on strategies of looking which are controlled by men, and that this control is obtained by oppressing woman, by relegating woman to a marginal place where she gives meaning to patriarchal textual modes but is not allowed a full participation in them. The occasional appearance of women-characters or filmic practices which rebel against this state of affairs by actively exposing their sexual difference is controlled and eliminated by phallocentric textual moves.

Mulvey’s statements seem to be a reduction of a wider process, attributed to the viewer in general, which carries political connotations: instances of communication in which a subject acts as decoder of a text—a text constructed on the basis of the distance decoder-text—transform such a subject into an oppressor. This transformation takes place because the function of such a decoder is to organise the collection of shapeless data (s)he receives into a fixed, ordered pattern where their subversive capacity—the subversiveness inherent to disorder and chaos within a system which relies on order to preserve itself—is denied or concealed, since such a capacity threatens to destroy the symbolic system, the system of the code.

I anticipated that my modest contribution to «Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema» would involve a discussion of a certain implicit essentialism that might be found in it, I will now try to explain what I meant. Laura Mulvey’s idea of the process of investigation on woman as an oppressive patriarchal strategy preserves a view of woman as constructed by the text, of woman who, in such a process of construction, is manipulated and oppressed because she is presented negatively. This view seems to reject the existence of an essence of woman, and therefore makes any attempt at reaching it inconceivable. If the essence of woman is inacessible, then woman is preserved from the threat of patriarchy,

³ This tendency to deny woman an essence and to emphasise her constructed nature has not been shared by all types of feminism. Some of them, Cixous among them, have tried to propose a strategy of defence of woman by defending the different essence of woman with respect to man.
which attempts to describe woman as essentially different from man and uses such a difference as the basis for its patriarchal oppression. But this theoretical move implicitly acknowledges the existence of an essence of woman which such a defence against patriarchy tries to preserve. Mulvey’s discourse is therefore only apparently seeking to investigate the role of women in film. In fact she asserts that woman as such cannot be known, and this assertion in fact tries to discourage any search for the essence of woman. It is part of the attempt to make patriarchal oppression, which defends essential difference between the sexes, more difficult to be imposed.

Within the theoretical realm of sexual definition the critic may choose between theories which study woman as constructed and theories which present sexual difference as a matter of different masculine and feminine essences. The choice of one of them implicitly reveals an attitude towards the other. And from the moment one uses this argument—the constructed nature of woman—with a political intention, in order to counterattack the patriarchal attempt to impose and explain difference as difference of essences, one risks being accused of merely using a strategy in order to escape from this patriarchal pull by affirming the value of the opposite to what patriarchy defends. The use of a strategy in order to preserve something implicitly acknowledges that there is something to be defended: logically what the theory wants to omit, namely that the assumptions on which the description of spectatorship rests contain an implicit acknowledgement of an essence of woman. Therefore, the use of a view of woman as constructed with a political aim might be said to implicitly acknowledge the existence of an essence of woman. The use of an idea with political intentions is bound to be understood as an attack or a defence, and both imply the existence of a correct position to be preserved. The choice of the position to be defended usually depends on the attitude adopted by the political enemy, and the position adopted is usually one of confrontation with the enemy’s. Mulvey’s choice of a defence of woman as constructed might seem to be only part of a political attitude to attack the patriarchal defence of essences by affirming the opposite stance. In fact, this apparent advocacy of a feminine essence seems to be the aim of Mulvey’s most committed activity: her films, where she systematically attempts to propose an essentially different conception of woman.

D.N. Rodowick has also ascribed the adjective «essentialist» to Mulvey’s theory of identificatory tendencies in cinema (1982). According to Rodowick, Mulvey sets out to analyse the mechanisms which produce pleasure in the process of looking and ends up by using two sets of conceptual pairs which threaten to deconstruct the basis of her theory. For her the structure of the look is basically a source of control, and it is fundamentally masculine. She understands two ways in which the fear of castration, and therefore unpleasure, can be avoided by the masculine look: one active called voyeurism and associated to sadistic impulses, and another passive called fetishistic scopophilia—the transformation of the dangerous female into object of admiration and reverence. For Rodowick this second possibility of avoiding the fear of castration is clearly associated to masochism, defined as passive submission to the object. Mulvey’s illusion of this connection, and her simultaneous insistence on the relationship between voyeurism and sadism, reveals her political intention to consistently qualify the masculine as controlling and oppressive. Since the idea of masochism would add inconsistency to her argument—the masculine look would then signify both exercise of power and submission to power—she just refuses to mention it (1982, 7). In fact what Rodowick perceives throughout Mulvey’s article is the attempt to negate the possibility that men may be the object of the same forces she argues patriarchal structures use against women—that men may be erotic objects, or may be submitted to an economy of masochism. This consistent attempt reveals that Mul-
vey’s «sets of oppositions which define psychological characteristics are fully and incontrovertably derived from their reduction to a definition according to biological difference.» (1982:8). Mulvey does not allow her theory to contemplate the possibility that both objects and subjects may be changeable, that a subject may become an object and vice versa since identification and pleasure are present in representations: they are constructed and therefore subject to many social and historical variables, they do not offer us immutable sets of relationships. Her refusal to grant men the possibility of the same positions she ascribes to women, and her classification of identificatory options as unchangeable and not as subject to the dynamics of textual construction, reveal her implicit definition of the categories male/female according to biological difference.

To summarise the points made so far, for feminist critics who adopt a semiotic kind of analysis the feminine is absent from the symbolic, it is placed in the preoedipal phase. What I have tried to say is: is this not a tactic, in the case of the phenomena described by Mulvey, in order to present the definition of the essence of woman as something impossible, so that such a lack of definition allows her feminist criticism to defend contradictory ideas and adapt to unexpected situations? In fact, the problem with Mulvey’s account in «Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema» is that it perpetuates, by using it and taking it as its ideological basis, the system of definition of the individual proposed by Lacanian psychoanalysis. This model presents the process of socialisation of the individual as a traumatic discovery of the other, in which the subject projects and recognises himself, therefore becoming aware of his/her split nature, of his/her lack of unity. This traumatic discovery leads the subject to a social system where (s)he will acquire a significance by his/her opposition to what is not himself/herself, by the imposition of an external law which carries a sexual bias in it, this being the origin of a symbolic system of oppositions—language—as a pervasive organising element of society.

But what would happen if such a symbolic system of patriarchy, which is based on sexual definition by difference and opposition, were revealed to be also oppressive for men, and if it presented men as constructed placing them in a disadvantageous, unprivileged position? Would this not dismantle the system of oppositions Mulvey’s account has set, and ultimately render the patriarchal symbolic system inappropriate from a logical point of view? The patriarchal system of construction of gender relations has relegated woman to a secondary position and has defined her by opposition to man, who is taken to constitute the privileged pole of the opposition. This distinction resembles the workings of symbolic languages and also Derrida’s distinction between the omnipotent centre and the weak margins, which he uses in order to explain the effects of logocentrism in Western societies. He understands both the margins and the centre as constructed through systems of oppositions: the margins are created by their opposition to the centre, and the centre needs the margins in order to define itself by the opposition the margins establish. The only difference between margins and centre is that the centre is constructed as more potent and privileged than the margins, but both are definitely constructions. Now, if this constructed centre where Mulvey’s description of spectatorship has placed the notion of man were to be discovered not to present man as privileged or the most potent, then we should assume that the opposition adopted by Mulvey’s article would need to take such a discovery into account. This is precisely what I will try to prove in my analysis of Kubrick’s Full Metal Jacket (1987).

The destruction of the opposition would then make it necessary for the system of definition of woman adopted by Mulvey’s article to include such a possibility. This new state of affairs demands a new kind of account of spectatorship which would need to look at other concepts other than systems of difference and opposition for a theoretical back-
ground. In my opinion this would turn gender studies of spectatorship in a direction where they would need to propose their own view of femininity outside the system of the patriarchal text. Such feminist accounts would then start to build, as Foucault would say, a new system of bodies and pleasures, freed from the constraints of symbolic systems. But is this possible? It seems to me that it is impossible to create new systems which are not ultimately constructions. What a study of gender relations needs is new systems which expose the positions and relationships of man and woman in society from an ideological stance which attempts to remain aware of its inscription in patriarchy in order to fight it, and at the same time acknowledging the constructed nature of such systems. I may seem to be asking for an independent research body which is in fact impossible: signification cannot exist outside the systems of signification. But what is possible is to create systems of sexuality which do not rely on notions of sexual definition through opposition and confrontation.

Woman is analysed by Mulvey’s article as a construction: she only acquires a meaning through her difference from man, similarly to a symbolic sign, whose meaning depends on its difference from the rest of signs. Is it not true then that the other signs in the system—man in this case—are also defined by their difference with woman? In a symbolic system the defining interaction works both ways and therefore man is also the product of his difference from the other signs in the system. This means that man is also constructed, man is the result of the forces working inside a system as much as woman is. The system refuses to provide us with the essence of man in an attempt to show that man is subject to internal laws which bound him to the system⁴. Some texts show the different ways in which man is constructed, and among these some texts also portray how the privileged position reserved for man by the text is not only constructed but also presents man as not so privileged and potent as one should expect. Kubrick’s Full Metal Jacket (1987) is one such film: it defines the centre occupied by man as constructed and also as oppressive for men, finally offering a pessimistic representation of that man installed in the centre. The film uses woman as a marginal element whose only function is to define the situation of the soldiers during the Vietnam war. Woman is employed as the element of difference which creates the meaning of the men. Besides, the text bluntly acknowledges that it is creating an image of the American soldiers, that the image of masculinity it provides is a construction, and even relativises such a view suggesting that all accounts of Vietnam have been and will inevitably be biased, and that the film itself is no exception.

The scene leading to the death of the sniper and the death itself forms one of the major sections within the film. The process of training the soldiers undergo on Parris Island was aimed at building killing machines who would not hesitate in the face of the enemy, and who would be able to survive in a hostile environment. The second part places the soldiers in such an environment in order to test their efficiency, in order to test whether the American army’s ideology can face and control the reality of war. Within this scheme of events the sniper sequence is vital since it exemplifies the soldiers’ reaction to the hardships of combat. The sequence is also relevant for the establishment of the theme of the film, since the death of the sniper seems to promise the closure of a line of events related to the way the soldiers experience combat. The sequence lays bare the uselessness of all the training the marines had received at home: the soldiers are unable to prevent the death of three men at the hands of a single Vietnamese soldier. Besides, they are only able to re-

⁴ However, this argument does not invalidate the fact that in patriarchy man is perceived as the positive term and woman as the negative, or that man is constructed as more powerful.
ach the sniper once the platoon, ruled by a leader following organised military training, breaks up and the soldiers take individual action. It is the suppression of the rule of the platoon and the recourse to the feeling of comradeship the soldiers feel that results in efficiency, not the official training.

During the sequence the text offers to the viewer shots from the POV of the sniper but never a reverse shot which would reveal the identity of the hidden marksman. The final shoot-out is therefore the more astonishing since it not only reveals the proximity of violence but also the fact that the sniper is a young woman. This withheld piece of information suggests meaning in two directions. It links the presence of this woman with the other few women who have already appeared in the text—they were prostitutes offered by the Vietnamese soldiers to the American marines. Women appear oppressed not only by the war but also by their fellow-countrymen. In this atmosphere of general oppression the prostitutes represent the object of the oppression the soldiers exert over other human beings. Men are defined by opposition to these women, women are defined as oppressed, men the oppressors. The connotations of activity and risk the men take on through combat are opposed to the apparent safety of the prostitutes, always working in the rearguard. The defense of American ideology the marines feel so proud of involves generalised killings, an action which is marked as positive by the ideas the army sets and works by. Women are just the opposite, they are mere passive beings who must abide by the laws of the male (=army). The American soldiers are therefore in part defined as such by the presence of their opposites: the native women. The woman-sniper also suggests the contrast between the large and powerful American army and the weak Vietnamese opposition. In fact she represents more emphatically the difference imposed by weakness—that of the defenseless Vietnamese people—than that of sexual difference, although sexual difference is also present, as we will see later. This seems to be the intention of the text if we compare the sequence with the rest of the film.

The text consistently uses the implicit comparison between fragments of the diegesis as a source of meaning. The first and the second sections constantly interact suggesting the inefficiency of the military training on Parris Island, at the same time as they point out the gradual assumption of the ideology of nationalism and bigotry Hartman represented in the first part. The scene portraying the death of the sniper is implicitly compared with the scenes of the prostitutes, as has already been commented on, but also with Hand Job’s death scene. Hand Job had died in a skirmish with the enemy and the text had shown, in a POVs from the dead body on the ground, the different remarks his friends uttered in a farewell gathering. The remarks express different views on the war and on the presence of the American marines in Vietnam: from the memories of the dead comrade to Mother Animal’s selfishness (‘Better you than me’), or to the naive defense of the war Rafterman makes (‘At least you can say he died for a good cause’). The presence of the dying sniper, lying on the ground, also justifies the use of POVs shots where the men disagree about what they should do with her. From the cruelty of Mother Animal, who suggests leaving her there (‘Let ‘er rot’), to Joker’s compassion which leads him to put a quick end to her suffering. The comparison suggests that the moribund sniper is a part of the soldiers, a part of their personality and feelings which they are killing in themselves: they are killing the weak side of their being, the side which might prevent them from killing and which might result in their own death. The sniper sequence means the final adoption of Hartman’s teaching, they are now killing machines who will not hesitate to shoot a person, even in cold blood. But at the same time it also represents the victory of Joker’s feelings of sympathy for human beings; the scene is followed by Joker’s final statement where he drives home the idea that he has had to temporarily suppress his most human feelings in order to sur-
vive, and that he has had to assume Hartman’s ideology if he wanted to return home safe and sound. From this perspective it is the sniper’s weak and defenseless nature, rather than her being a woman, that interacts with the rest of the elements in the text and creates meaning. In any case, the difference between Hand Job and the sniper is obviously their different sex, and we could not deny that the question of sex helps the creation of this meaning of weakness, and that sexual difference is therefore part of the process of definition of the soldiers as representatives of the prevailing American ideology.

Man is therefore constructed by means of a dynamics of meaning creation which sets him in opposition to women, which uses sexual difference as source of meaning. But not only this: paralleling the construction of woman feminist criticism tends to identify in narratives, the text does not offer us an allegedly truthful image of Americanness but a series of images which correspond to a preestablished external view of what America and the Americans are. Pop music helps the narrative convey ideas throughout the film: «These Boots Were Made for Walking» accompanies the initial scene of the second part and suggests the American cultural invasion as much as the oppression the war meant for the Vietnamese. «Paint It Black» over the final titles suggests the bleak view of humanity the film has just offered to us together with the promise of a bleak future. The soldiers refer to themselves as killers and «Heartbreakers», adopting one of the many clichés pop singers represent. Pop music constantly refers to the soldiers’ attempt to fit in already made clichés, a process which the training of the first part had started.

The soldiers are also seen to strive to accommodate to models of Americanness which inevitably include a heavy component of violence. These models have been usually created by the Hollywood tradition of cinema. The clearest example is perhaps Joker’s quotations from John Wayne’s lines, where he lays bare the American myth that the law imposed through violence is the basis of society, as The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962) clearly exposes, a film where Wayne’s embodiment of this myth is evident. Joker also wears a peace button which reminds us of the buckle the villain in Dirty Harry (1971) wore. Both cases emphasise the importance and the necessity of violence for the establishment of a lawful state.

These previous images of America and the Americans are intimately linked to an element which has in part helped produce them. The phenomenon of television, and audiovisual mass media in general, is an essential part of the life, and of the construction of life, American society has fostered. Full Metal Jacket tries to explore the issue of television as producer of an account of the Vietnam war, since the direct experience of the war was not available to the average American. A scene in particular seems to encapsulate most of the ideas about television the film sets out to expound. During one of the attacks previous to the sniper sequence Joker and Rafterman accompany Cowboy’s platoon. The text shows us a composition in deep space in which the enemy occupies the background, Joker and the soldiers the middleground, and a television camera recording the skirmish appears in the foreground. The men holding the camera move laterally from right to left filming the row of soldiers who have taken refuge behind a short wall. As the camera frames each soldier they utter lines of dialogue, as if the movement of the camera were governing the turns for the possession of the word. The film’s frame also moves laterally in order to frame the three planes of depth, and in this strategy the text manages to draw a parallelism between the «diegetic» camera and the «extradiegetic» one, suggesting their common status as creators of what the viewers will take to be the whole truth about the war.

Besides, this scene is accompanied by dialogue which again exemplifies the tradition of violence created by Hollywood cinema: the soldiers in turns complete a coherent dialogue where they suggest that they are becoming the stars in a film («This is Vietnam, the
movie»), and that they should shoot a western where Joker would be John Wayne and the Vietnamese would be the Indians («We’ll let the gooks play the Indians»). The scene had started in a nearby setting and the change to this new setting, the dialogue lines and the reference to the process television, and by extension cinema, is carrying out in the elaboration of a certain response to the war results in one of the most meaningful fragments in the whole film. The accumulation of signifying elements at this particular moment lays bare the text’s tendency to openly expose its mechanisms, its potentiality to construct a view of reality. The film’s self-consciousness sets its concerns in the realm of self-criticism, and by extension leads the viewer to reflect on, and therefore become more aware of, this potentiality.

As a conclusion, it can be argued that Full Metal Jacket shows a certain refusal to provide the essence of man, an interest in revealing man as constructed, as an image whose meaning does not emanate from the individual but is imposed on man by the system. It proves that a symbolic construction of gender oppresses men as well as women, since both are defined by their difference from the other. The process of construction of the image of man in the text is not only carried out through the opposition male-female, but also and most importantly by the definition of a man who is at the centre of a system of references, symbols and images which he is forced to adapt to. Man is placed in the centre of the system and presented as constructed by the text. Besides, the text presents a negative image of this constructed and central man: the soldiers have finally adopted Hartman’s ideological code and have become killing machines without feelings, the men are portrayed as the objects of oppression and in my opinion they are not presented, in their predicament, as more privileged than women are. The text shows that the centre which has been used by both patriarchy and some kinds of feminism in order to define women by a dynamics of opposition does not always privilege the position of men.

In my opinion this conclusion affects those accounts of woman proposed in Mulvey’s «Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema». If the centre stops being the privileged position presented in the process of sexual construction, the definition of woman will have to be carried out by other means than laws of opposition. Mulvey’s tendency to rely on this opposition as the basis for the process of domination or of denunciation of woman’s oppression will have to be revised. Without forgetting that this dynamics of definition (=oppression) of woman has its origin in the patriarchal system of gender relations, I think we should concentrate on possible feminist responses to this state where the centre of the system has taken a new light. In my opinion Mulvey’s fight against patriarchy should take a new direction in which it should stop using models of woman definition based on symbolic constructions which emanate from relations of opposition. Her description of spectatorship should free itself from those constraints, and should try to elaborate models for the analysis of gender relations where the different constructed positions of man and woman in society are explored. Those models will always be constructions, since it is impossible to escape the grip of symbolic systems, but those constructions should propose a new view of femininity outside the symbolic system of oppositions.

Recent research on feminism has proposed a process of socialisation which seems to pave the way for a model of sexual definition not based on difference or opposition. Jane Flax’s Thinking Fragments (1990) provides such a novelty. She draws on Winnicott’s theories of object relations: whereas for Lacan the child only relates to the objects (s)he encounters through projection, which derives into recognition of fragmentation and violent imposition of the law, for Winnicott the child can understand the object as real and external, and not as a mere projection, learning to use the object. For Lacan symbolisation is
phallic, it is imposed from the outside by a masculine social system which has altered the mother-child relationship. For Winnicott symbolisation appears simultaneously with the capacity to use an object; symbolisation is born out of the transitional process, it is not imposed by external reality through the impersonal logic of language. The gradual adoption of one's constructed position in the social system is not born out of the recognition of difference and opposition, but of the assimilation and acceptance of what is perceived as external to one. For Lacan, and Freud, the subject does not desire to perceive the other as an independent being. For Winnicott the loss of the primateal unity and power does not necessarily provoke any injury; the subject can benefit by allowing an object to exist independently; the child can recognise and appreciate an object that exists independently of himself/herself, not compulsorily using it as an element of difference or contrast in order to define himself/herself. This means that for Winnicott, and Flax, the discovery of the other is not necessarily felt to be the discovery of an external law associated with male dominance, an idea which seems to duce Freud’s conceptualisation of the Oedipal phase as the establishment of sexual roles through opposition (1990, 88-134). Flax’s concept of socialisation shows that the definition of the individual does not necessarily have to involve contrast with what is different from him/her, and that it does not have to ascribe to the individual sexually charged positions in the system (s)he is introduced to. It relies on the notion that the subject accepts and assimilates what is felt to be external and different, and such incorporation enriches and forms him/her. This concept enables the critic to propose a process of sexual definition not based on oppositions which inevitably contain a sexual bias. Feminist film criticism which takes this new process into account is one of the ways in which we may humbly attempt to suggest improvements on the influential account of spectatorship outlined by Mulvey.

REFERENCES


