Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema and the Transformation of Philip K. Dick

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Recently, I was exposed to Laura Mulvey’s thesis, *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema* (1975), in my German Film class. Mulvey writes that mainstream film, by default, assumes a male perspective in their audience by positioning and manipulating the portrayal of women. In her thesis, she hopes to tear down what she sees as patriarchal film norms by making the audience and director aware of these inherently sexist tropes. I do realize this is a literature class, not a film class. Books aren’t a visual medium, you don’t open them up and get a curated picture beamed into your eyes. However, I would argue that when you read a book, while you do come up with your own portrayal of the word the author describes, the author is still describing that world to you, directing where you put your focus and controlling the actions of the characters. Therefore, despite not intended for a non-visual medium, I argue that Mulvey’s thesis is still a powerful force in pointing out the issues with the portrayal of women in Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, as well as Dick’s reasons for amending his female characters in his later works.

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Although I’m stating the obvious, I’m not the first to have criticized Philip Dick’s portrayal of women. Many have done so to his work over the many decades it’s been in public circulation. The most interesting of these was author Ursula LeGuin who was surprisingly also one of Dick’s friends. In 1981, a series of letters between the authors were published in the journal *Science Fiction Review*, currently housed in the Dodd Center Archives & Special Collections: Alternative Press Folio Collection. It begins with a letter by Dick when he is made aware of a speech that LeGuin gave at Emory University. In the speech, she made offhand comments about his female characters, “every one of which, she argued, was at the bottom (I cannot remember her exact phrase) a hateful and not-to-be-trusted death figure” (Geis 31), as said by Dick’s secondhand account. Dick goes on to defend himself against her other criticisms of his mental state, but dodges explaining his portrayal of female characters by claiming that all his characters are rogues (Geis 31). LeGuin fires back in the same issue of *Science Fiction Review*, anticipating his response to her speech by saying:

“But I get scared by your recent books & stories, because it seems like you hate women now, and the part of you that is women is denied and despised. It’s all yang and no yin, all heaven and no earth, all word and no matter. And I’m not at home there, I’m shut out, I can no longer follow your art, which has been such a joy and solace to me” (Geis 32).

LeGuin makes many of the same criticisms I made in my previous paragraphs. Dick’s women are deceitful, devious and manipulative. They’re always working against the main male character, trying to influence his actions away from his true desires. The primary focus isn’t on themselves, but themselves working against the male character by physiological means instead of physical ones, such as Rachel’s manipulation of Rick’s actions in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. They have little to no impact outside the realm of the male character, and it’s very evident in these examples.