Michele Aaron’s new book traces a history of spectatorship studies, providing a line of attack for comprehending the many issues surrounding the contemporary debate on this topic. Central to the conflict between various methodologies of what it is that characterizes the individual’s engagement and what accounts for his or her interpretation of a film, including the unconscious processes of psychoanalysis, or the social processes of cultural studies, is for Aaron the question of the spectator’s agency; or as she writes, the individual’s own role in determining the meaningfulness of cinema (1). Aaron points out that spectatorship is a crucial issue within critical thinking in general, is central to film studies, and is the question of negotiation between the spectator’s activity or passivity, manipulation or resistance, distance or implication. Aaron’s aim in *The Power of Looking On* is to retell the discussion of spectatorship as a story of agency, in which the author, by paring down methodological and other tensions, prioritizes the spectator’s response and responsibility.

Michele Aaron, professor of film studies at the University of Birmingham, UK, is also known for her work as the editor of *The Body’s Perilous Pleasures: Dangerous Desires and Contemporary Culture* (1999) and *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader* (2004.) Written in two sections, *The Power of Looking On* in the first half of the book attempts to reconcile the previously conflicted elements mentioned, to privilege synthesis, and in so
doing, explores the interaction of textual practices, psychological processes and social context. In the second half of the book Aaron puts this triangulation into practice. Arguing that many theories including reader-response theory, as well as involving critics from various schools of thought including formalists, phenomenologists, structuralists, and psychoanalysts, while refocusing attention upon the reader tend to undermine the distinction between the subject (reader) and object (text), Aaron argues that there must be a return to textual analysis, for it is the spectator’s submersion in and submission to the text which must be understood as an inevitable part of the act of engagement.

Placing the origin of the ‘spectator’ within the social context of post-’68 France the author begins by revealing the original conception of the spectator as a powerless and passive product of the ideological institution of cinema. As a topic of debate Aaron cites not only French social history as an important development, but also Structuralism, and presents the notion that both profoundly impacted the reappraisal of individual agency, and would result in the birth as well as the death of the spectator. What emerges from this preliminary discussion are three key issues which the rest of the book deals with and which the writer refers to as the “three Ds”; the issue of difference or the effect of gender of the spectator on spectatorship; of done-ness, or the need for reconsideration of post-liberation culture with regard to women, gays, and “sex” (23) and submission for the spectator; and the issue of disavowal, or how spectatorship requires a denial or distance from various connotations upon which it happens to depend.

Chapter two takes up problems with the classical model of spectatorship and discusses how the difference between spectators, in particular sexual differences, determines understanding of their agency, especially their relationship to passivity, highlighting and citing examples of the way in which classical narrative cinema solicits and privileges a male experience. Aaron then concludes the chapter with several feminist revisions to this classic model of spectatorship. Chapter three explores an alternative model of spectatorship which attempts to dismantle the previous chapters’ sadistic model of the pleasures of spectatorship, to suggest instead one grounded in masochism. The author writes in this chapter that as masochistic, the spectator’s visual and other pleasures will be found to be grounded in the ‘unpleasures’ (54) offered by film. As masochistic, the
spectators experience will be shown to be consensual and contractual and the submission that characterizes spectatorship embodies, rather than expels, agency. Aaron concludes the chapter by suggesting that cultural indulgence in perverse pleasures through film is managed by the social definitions of perversity, both legislative and otherwise. In Chapter four Aaron questions the possibility of consequences of the spectator's complicity. Framing contemporary spectatorship in the proliferation of socially or emotionally problematic images, the book ends with a call for an ethical reconsideration of the spectator's experience, and in this way ties the various threads together from spectatorial acquiescence, to assertion and relinquishment of control, to accountability.

This book is tailored as an integrated approach to film studies and is a valuable tool for both lecturer and students interested in cinema and popular culture. The text offers a concise, learned, and readable approach for understanding spectatorship and its place in the field of film studies. While written with an academic orientation, particularly with reference to the author's discussion of the various theories, the book is useful in the way it which it applies theory in a larger context to the art of film, offering the reader stimulating accessibility and insight.

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