



“I Learned an Awful Lot in Little Rock”: Laura Mulvey Reflects on her *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* Remix

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Retiring *[in]Transition* founding co-editor Catherine Grant reflects on her curation of Laura Mulvey’s remix of a sequence from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) in the opening editorial of our journal’s inaugural issue in 2014. Here she presents a new videographic study of this remix that she made in collaboration with Mulvey herself in 2024, which includes this foundational scholar’s audio commentary on her work.





Creator's Statement

For the March 2014 launch issue of *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies*, the three co-editors Christian Keathley, Drew Morton and I jointly decided that we would each publish individual entries in which we curated exemplary videographic studies, alongside short statements that accounted or argued for this exemplariness. [Chris chose kogonada's 2013 video essay](#), the already classic "What is Neorealism?". In his statement, he argued (Keathley 2014) that kogonada's essay was a consummate work for the ways it balanced and integrated explanatory and poetical modes. [Drew's choice was Benjamin Sampson's "Layers of Paradox in *F for Fake*,"](#) and he argued (Morton 2014) that Sampson's piece was

an admirable example of the capabilities of the visual essay format because his reflexive formal approach—inspired by [Orson] Welles's own poetic license—is counter-balanced by the researched intellectual rigor that meets the demands of academia. After all, Welles is making art about art; Sampson is making an argument about art.

My individual entry showcased the videographic suite [Bergman Senses](#) (2007), which, unlike Chris and Drew's selections, did not use a voiceover or in-video captioning to help convey its rigorously researched critical argument. This project was conceived and directed by the late, great film scholar Thomas Elsaesser, working with project researcher Anne Bachmann and video editor Jonas Moberg. I argued that this 2007 made-for-the-museum work was exemplary and inspiring, in the era of the online scholarly video essay, not only because it opted for a montage-based form of associative

argument, but also because compilation videos at their best, like this series, might offer up or involve

an active viewing process, one of live co-research, or participant observation. Unlike written texts, they don't have to remove themselves from film-specific forms of meaning production to have their knowledge effects on us. And we can *feel*, as well as know about, the comparisons these videos enact. [Grant 2013; 2014B].

It is the other video project I curated for our 2014 inauguration, though, that brings me to the audiovisual work I am presenting in this second launch issue of *[in]Transition*, as our journal begins its next decade with a move to a wonderful new publisher and platform and as I choose to step down as a co-editor after ten, often thrilling, years in that role. Like Elsaesser, Bachmann and Moberg's videos, this other published video took a highly unconventional form for work by a film scholar.

Back in 2014, I was charged with the responsibility of writing the lion's-share of **the editorial introduction to our launch** (Grant 2014A). For that I decided we should curate a video, so that no part of our first publication would be comprised solely of written text. I persuaded my colleagues that we should make *[in]Transition's* very first published videographic work a short and tightly focused video that had first been made in the late 1990s and had circulated quite widely but not yet online: Laura Mulvey's remix of a sequence from the "Two Little Girls from Little Rock" number from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), digitally recreated from an analogue version in 2013. We were fortunate indeed, and very grateful, that Mulvey was happy to publish her work with us.

I wasn't writing as an individual in that introduction, but my personal reasons for choosing her work were multiple. First, Mulvey, an esteemed member of our inaugural editorial advisory board, was, most unusually in the discipline of film and moving image studies, a foundational figure who had often engaged in film and critical theory-related essayistic *film practice* alongside *writing* (about) film theory. Her two pioneering pieces of experimental videographic scholarship—a study of the beginning of *Imitation of Life* (1959) as well as her *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* remix, made first in the late 1990s—had been especially formative in my own turn to making video essays in 2009. I saw Mulvey's *Imitation of Life* analysis in 2005 in a research talk she gave that would be published as part of the book *Death 24x a Second* the following year, which also carried a vivid description of the visual-analysis remix that we published in *[in]Transition*.

Perhaps most importantly, though, it was clear to me from both Mulvey's videos as well as from her numerous written accounts of them (for example: Mulvey 2006;

2015; 2017; and 2019), that her videographic analyses began with a process of private “pensive” and “possessive” spectatorial play (in the first instance, with the functions of a DVD remote control) before they became even more consciously analytical and finally materialised as edited objects in a fixed and thus repeatable digital audiovisual form.

As Mulvey wrote of this kind of “interactive spectator of textual analysis,” immersed in the playful exploration of “delaying cinema”:

The process of repetition and return involves stretching out the cinematic image to allow space and time for associative thought, reflection on resonance and connotation, the identification of visual clues, the interpretation of cinematic form and style, and ultimately, personal reverie. [2006: 146–7]

Mulvey’s act of stretching the *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* sequence, pausing on Monroe’s gestures and repeating them, reveals, materializes and, indeed, re-performs something that is already there in the original film sequence, but which is difficult to see or to reflect on fully at normal speed in its original cinematic flow: Monroe’s own agency in the composition of her exhibitionistic image, her knowingness, deliberation and virtuosity in performing it. The experimental editing gestures of Mulvey’s video thus generated space for numerous valuable insights into Monroe’s gestures and into the gestures of star pose and performance in Hollywood more generally (see Grant 2017 for further reflections on this).

Mulvey’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* remix is for me a model of the sensuous, probing but also open or “co-research” based approaches to which I also respond in the *Bergman Senses* videos. This modality underpins almost all my own videographic work as I have described in numerous written reflections on my process (including Grant 2013; 2014C; 2014D). Like *Bergman Senses*, Mulvey’s remix also eschews commentary. But even without this, it became an intensely productive piece of what I call videographic “material thinking” (2014C) and performative film studies research (Grant 2016) from the perspective of subsequent verbal reflections, too, as is amply evidenced by the richness of the pieces of writing Mulvey produced about it, even many years after its making. As Jason Mittell writes of this kind of experimental or “exploratory impulse” in videographic scholarship (2024)—a different register to be mapped on the influential “explanatory-to-poetical continuum” first posited by Keathley (2011)—ideas or insights are generated that “could have only emerged through the material processes of making the video essay itself” (Mittell, forthcoming).

Ten years later, I still feel the deep influence of Mulvey’s work on my own. So, in order to celebrate it, but also to explore it, in Mittell’s sense, and perhaps most importantly, to audiovisually document Mulvey’s videographic production process

in more detail than has happened to date, I chose to work with Laura herself over the last months to produce a two-part study of her original work on *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. The product of our collaboration comprises an audio commentary version of the remix, with narration written and voiced by her, followed by a kind of videographic “making of” study: both a critical reconstruction, based on an interview I carried out with her, and my own work of audiovisual material thinking, playing with some of her memories, stated intentions and influences in ways that will hopefully continue to inspire others.

I am of course aware of the paradox of making an explanatory video essay out of what was, notably, a commentary-free, exploratory, and even poetic work, but academic instrumentality and “new knowledge” do indeed come in many and varied forms. And there has been a very satisfying circularity to working in this conclusive way to mark the end of my tenure as an active *[in]Transition* co-editor.

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It has truly been an honour as well as a great pleasure to work with you all.

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Biography

Catherine Grant is Honorary Professor at Aarhus Universitet, Denmark, and Senior Research Fellow at the University of Reading, UK. Formerly, she was Professor of Digital Media and Screen Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. Grant was elected a member of the Film, Media and Visual Studies section of Academia Europaea in 2020. She carries out her film and moving image studies research mostly in the form of remix-based video essays. She also runs the Film Studies For Free social media platforms, and until March 2024 she served as a founding co-editor of the award-winning, peer-reviewed journal [in] *Transition: Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies*.

