

Non-peer reviewed

Received: 2023-02-10

Accepted: 2023-05-25

# FEMALE REPRESENTATION THROUGH THE EMBODIMENT OF DESIRE

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*Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies?* (Atwood, 1993).

Cinema has steadily and meticulously manipulated the curious nature of human voyeurism, generally without the awareness of the average unsuspecting audience member. It is the absolute ideal breeding ground for both the creation and perpetuation of negative and even potentially damaging images, primarily those of women. Therein lies the issue that has for years plagued cinema - the concept of the male gaze. The male gaze is explained as the portrayal of women in visual media through the lens of a heterosexual man, resulting in the marginalization and sexualization of female characters via their casting as objects of desire, and simultaneous empowerment of the leading man. The male gaze has a negative influence on the representation of women in film along with working to maintain the patriarchal structure of society at large.

There is an abundance of visual depictions of women in contemporary film, and yet, beyond them serving as an object of pleasure, there are hardly any actual, true to real life, women. The rationale behind this is quite simple: on the basis that, mirroring the overall male-run societal framework, the film industry is dominated by men, especially behind the scenes in the roles of directors, writers and cinematographers, they tend to create stories that cater to them and the general male audience. This asymmetric power dynamic is emphasized by the fact that only a tenth of the top grossing films in 2019 were made by female directors, which is apparently a major improvement in comparison to previous years (Ramos, 2020). The intended viewer is male; accordingly, the narratives appeal to their perceived wants. It is a formula that has been regurgitated since the dawn of cinema and became normalized over time, when in reality, it directly appeals to only a portion of the male audience. The general audience has been groomed into accepting it and the industry relies on viewers not examining films with a critical eye.

The actual term “male gaze” was coined and popularized by Laura Mulvey (1975) in her essay “Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema”, a highly influential and formative theoretical perspective in which she explored the role of women in film by examining the intertwinement of film theory and feminism with psychoanalysis. Her argument is constructed around Sigmund Freud’s theories on sexuality and centers on scopophilia in particular. Scopophilia is referred to as the “the love of looking”, but more specifically, it is defined as the feelings of pleasure that arise from looking at another person, whether as a

figure of innocent beauty or as an object of eroticism. Needless to say, the consent of the person being looked at is disregarded, as they are most often an unwilling participant subjected to the prying eye of the looker.

Mulvey (1975) argues that in film, scopophilia predominantly manifests itself as the expression of male heterosexuality. The majority of mainstream movies are created with this in mind, thus, the goal is to indulge these desires - the women in film are the passive recipients of the look, while the men are the active bearers of the look. For the audience, the simple act of spectating the screen in front of them serves as a subconscious display of voyeurism. Whether this spectatorship occurs in the darkness of a movie theatre or the comfort of one's own home, it presents the viewer with the opportunity to lay their eyes on a private world that is completely detached from and unaffected by their presence, irrespective of the fact it is a fictitious one. By the virtue of it being unchangeable, film displayed on the screen allows the spectators to attain visual pleasure by playing into some sort of voyeuristic fantasy, while at the same time having the benefit of a degree of separation.

Yet another process that occurs simultaneously and becomes an important factor of the gaze, along with the voyeuristic look at and objectification of the women on screen, is one that arises from the narcissistic tendencies of the viewer - the masculine process of self-identification with the protagonist. In general, male audience members tend to, on their own accord, project their own self onto the leading man. The traditional Hollywood hero is depicted as a handsome man with plenty of desirable qualities, and he often finds himself in situations where he is able to flaunt his intelligence or physical prowess as a marker of his masculinity. Tying into Freud's theoretical framework, this idealized representation of the male prototype gives rise to the ego ideal, meaning the internal image of perfection that an individual, in this case the viewer of a film, strives to become. This self-identification with the charismatic characters on screen allows the male viewers to not only reinforce their own ego and project their own aspirations, but to also covet and possess the film's female characters in an indirect manner.

According to Mulvey (1975), there are three different existing types of "looks" or spectatorships present in cinema. The first one is the aforementioned gaze of the audience, and it is concerned with how these viewers engage with the film and characters they are observing. It is also the only type of spectatorship that is influenced by the other types. The second one revolves around the mutual perception between the characters on screen, a purely fictional one that stems from the screenwriter's pen. The focus of this look is to determine the on-screen gender dynamics when placed in a certain narrative, with the focal point being how the male protagonist views and interacts with his female counterpart throughout the duration of the film. Consequently, the protagonist is the one that controls and drives the narrative, since he is the one the audience is meant to project themselves onto.

The last look corresponds to the perspective of the camera itself and in what way it records the events transpiring on screen. The movement of the camera commands a great deal of power, owing to the fact that the lens is meant to act as a stand-in for the audience. The placement and position of the camera is equally as instrumental to the film and the manner in which its characters are going to be perceived by the audience as is the screenplay or its

inherent dialogue. Such framing is the outcome of the people standing behind the camera, which in most cases happens to be men - the plethora of male cinematographers, male writers and male directors. Thus, the camera typically frames the female characters in line in with what they consider to be most appealing. This can be achieved through the shot lingering over the woman's body for an extended period of time, or slowly panning upwards from the bottom, thereby ensuring no part of her body goes unnoticed. In other even more excessive cases, the camera zooms in deeply onto only fragmented body parts, in order to accentuate features such as the chest or the derriere - as result, the person being ogled is instantaneously objectified.

An immensely popular example of the male gaze in mainstream cinema is taken from an infamous scene involving Megan Fox's character in 2007's *Transformers*. In contrast to many other love interests, the screenwriters actually provided her with a backstory, mentioning her own hobbies and family life. Unsurprisingly, her backstory is quickly forgotten about, because her primary role is to serve as the ultimate „hot girl“ the protagonist desires. Early on in the movie, as seen in Image 1, she is seen scantily dressed in cropped clothing, bending over the open hood of the male protagonist's car while attempting to repair the engine. The camera gratuitously pans over her entire body, stopping at times to focus on her exposed midriff. Every once in a while the frame reverts back to the face of the leading man, who is ogling her without pause - presenting the viewers with the opportunity to project themselves onto and identify with him (Velde, 2018).



Image 1. Megan Fox in *Transformers*. Taken from <https://www.sistemacritico.it/?p=11989>

The male gaze can be immediately recognized through the manifestation of familiar tropes that represent various archetypes of female characters, all of which share a common characteristic - serving the needs of the male protagonist. The most well-known trope is that of the “blonde bombshell” whose sole purpose is to be ogled and lusted after by the leading man. Other than her physical attractiveness, none of her qualities or personality traits are introduced, for she only exists in relation to the protagonist. This trope is embodied by the likes of Marilyn Monroe in her roles as the ditzy beauty and Margot Robbie in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, in which the camera slowly pans over her figure each time she

shows up in a scene, sexualizing her mere presence, though she only has minimal function in the entire plot (Herbst, 2014).

In juxtaposition with the traditional bombshell, more contemporary films have introduced the “manic pixie dream girl” archetype. Once again these female characters are often one-dimensional, but in a distinct way - they do not only serve as the conventional eye candy. The manic pixie instead is an eccentric, free-spirited character, whose purpose is to “inspire a greater appreciation for life in a male protagonist” (Adams, 2015). The love interest from the 2010 film *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, the mysterious and quirky Ramona Flowers, whose main character trait is her sporadic changes of hair color, provides a quintessential example of the trope. Before meeting Ramona, the protagonist, Scott, was of the awkward, nerdish sort, and living quite an unremarkable life - yet after she first appears to him in a dream, his life is changed forever, as “what begins as a journey to ‘get the girl’ ends in a philosophical journey to self-respect” (Smith, 2021). With no discernable aspirations of her own, the surface-level qualities placed upon her leave a lot to be desired, as they are empty attempts at making her appealing. The problem arises from the fact that this is yet another caricature of women, one who is too idealized to be real. Actual women are autonomous beings with their own desires and ambitions and not a tool to be used and discarded for the purpose of a man’s transformation.

One trope that has for years gone unnoticed is the “born sexy yesterday”, which commonly shows up in genres such as science fiction or fantasy. This concept refers to a female character that has the physical appearance of a conventionally beautiful, youthful yet grown woman who oozes sex appeal; but her mind is that of a naive child, and so accordingly, she lacks the comprehension of her general surroundings, including regular human interactions and social norms. The most representative example of this trope is Leeloo from the *Fifth Element*, a recently engineered humanoid with zero life experience. Due to her child-like mind, she is unable to grasp the implications of public nudity, which the male gaze of the camera readily takes advantage of. In one scene, she starts to unhesitatingly undress in front of random men, and although they are the ones who take up the foreground of the screen, her naked body is still plainly apparent behind them (Pop Culture Detective, 2017).

Through the film’s course, as depicted on Image 2, Leeloo is guided by the protagonist, an older and much more experienced man who takes her under his wing; assuredly, the movie portrays them falling in love and invites the audience to think of it as a romantic event, rather than a disturbing power imbalance that enacts the male fantasy of a “justified version of *Lolita*” (Miller, 2020). The trope also has origins in patriarchal colonialism and its romanticized depictions in media, in which the white hero falls for an indigenous woman. Similarly to the manic pixie, the women’s juvenile behaviors, in conjunction with their lack of agency and autonomy, reinforces unfavorable stereotypes that belittle women and undermine their abilities, while simultaneously emphasizing male superiority.



Image 2. The Fifth Element.

Taken from <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119116/mediaviewer/rm2678952705/>

A common criticism of the concept of the male gaze comes from individuals who argue that this gaze is not something intrinsically negative or oppressive, but rather a single (out of many more) element of a film's aesthetic style meant to bring visual gratification to the audience; and that to suggest the male gaze is damaging is equal to condemning the naturally occurring human reactions of attraction and lust (Leonard, 2020). This point of view is obtuse, as it ignores the implications of the male gaze regarding the representation of women, both on screen and in the real world. The male viewing pleasure or even the sexualization of women is not inherently destructive; it is the amalgamation of these two - women being objectified for the sake of male desire - that is troubling.

As regards to the cinematic ramifications, the issue does not arise from women being merely displayed in sexual situations, but rather from the disregard for them as fully fleshed-out characters, as they are represented and filmed in a manner that neglects their autonomy and places the power onto the male protagonist and the viewer. Furthermore, it translates itself to our everyday life, enforcing the patriarchal structure of society and influencing the way in which women are seen and perceived. Research has found that the male gaze has an extensive social effect - it promotes unpleasant social encounters propagated by men, such as cat-calling and unwanted suggestive comments. In turn, this intensifies self-objectification among women, pressuring them to conform to the desires of men and perform to the expectations of the male gaze (Well, 2017).

In contemporary cinema, there have been efforts to combat the monopolistic masculine gaze by incorporating different ways of looking. The "female gaze" approach subverts the male one, but in a peculiar way. It does not simply switch the genders of the looker and the person being looked at, thereby flipping the gaze and objectifying the men in the same manner. This would be a futile attempt at reversing the gaze, as by the virtue of patriarchy and the power imbalance between the genders, a direct equivalent in which men are objectified is inconceivable. The female gaze instead focuses on more complex narratives that portray the women as the autonomous subject and embrace their experiences and inner thoughts (Loreck, 2016).

The cinematic experience and the temporary gratification in the form of watching a film enables viewers to detach themselves from their reality. Although audiences are becoming increasingly aware of the prevalence of the male gaze, ultimately, the gaze is still such an inherent part of how we as the spectators consume our visual media. The inconspicuousness of the gaze is what allows it to continue to act as a medium for the patriarchy. Thus, we must learn to recognize this instrument of oppression, so that we can start to reject it – for it is the time to change the gaze.

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