

The Façade of the Hollywood “Female-Lead” Film

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The Façade of the Hollywood “Female-Lead” Film: The Inescapable Male Gaze

Despite female-lead films being more prevalent in Hollywood than ever, media coming out of the mainstream continues to construct women from the male gaze. Films that falsely claim to escape this gaze work against feminist equality, leaving audiences desperate for content that both promotes diverse representation and also fulfills a new gaze. This paper will first define the concepts of the male and female gaze and discuss the theorists behind them. It will then assess, using film examples, the divergence between the female gaze and Hollywood “female-lead” films. Finally, it will show how the female gaze looks when it is both genuinely understood and applied. To preface this paper, I’d like to state that my position reflects my exposure to the male gaze as a white, cis woman. The following critiques of the male gaze refer to that of white, able, cis male directors, as I feel I can reflect on their representations of women on screen.

The term “male gaze” was coined by the British, feminist critic Laura Mulvey in her 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. She combined Freud’s psychoanalysis and Lacan’s structuralism with feminism to explain classic Hollywood cinema’s tendency to objectify women (Parker, 2015). This objectification refers to the way women and others are reduced to objects or sexual things in order to fulfill the pleasure of the male spectator. She explains the male gaze as being a three-way relationship between the camera’s gaze, the characters on screen, and the spectators watching the film (Mulvey, 1999). The subjective camera, emphasized through suture and conventional editing, allows the spectator to see through the eyes of the character. This leads to the audience identifying with the actor’s gaze on the actress. Further, she argues that while men are active and filmed within three-dimensional spaces, women remain passive and are framed in two-dimensional spaces (Mulvey, 1999).

It is important to note a few critiques of Mulvey’s analysis of the male gaze. Some see it as being essentialist, with gender being framed as an absolute. They say it is organized around a binary opposition, with men being active spectators who look and women being passive objects that are looked at (Parker, 2015). Her argument also relies on the idea that audiences are passive in watching films, thus unable to escape the identification with the characters on screen. However, as films have become more

accessible (home video, internet streaming), audiences have more opportunities to be active viewers outside the constraints of dark, silent movie theatres. Active audiences may have led to a new awareness of the male gaze, but they have not solved the problem. The current culture, with its dependence on the patriarchy and sexism, still effects how films are produced and interpreted (Parker, 2015). This, unfortunately, has kept the male gaze alive and well, appearing in more forms of media than ever before.

Jill Soloway defines the male gaze simply, “It’s pretty much everything. [...] it’s most TV shows, it’s all movies.” (Soloway, 2016). They argue that the male gaze goes beyond films that intentionally objectify women. It is seen in films with “good intentions”, films that ignore women, films with female protagonists, and even films directed by women (Soloway, 2016). The way to combat the male gaze, Soloway argues, is through the female gaze. Although this appears to be a simple evaluation, in the forty-plus years since Mulvey’s essay, the idea of the female gaze has been relatively unexplored. Mary Ann Doane, a film theorist, discussed the idea of a “woman’s gaze” in her 1982 essay “Film and Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator”. However, the essay, using problematic language, argued that in order to achieve a female gaze, it is up to the female viewer to adapt her role as a spectator to create a female gaze within the male gaze (Doane, 1982). In contrast, Jill Soloway argues that the female gaze begins behind the camera, with the filmmaker. They describe the female gaze as being a “conscious effort to create empathy” through the use of a subjective camera that “feels” the protagonist (particularly not a white, cis male), as opposed to just seeing them (Soloway, 2016). Through subtleties in camera work, it attempts to create a sense of how it feels to be objectified by the male gaze. Further, the female gaze is about “reclaiming the body” (Soloway, 2016). This is achieved through actively creating a subject out of the protagonist and communicating their emotions over actions. Finally, the female gaze is not just “film for women, by women”. As Jill Soloway poetically states in their 2016 Toronto International Film Festival Master Class, “The female gaze seeks to destroy all gazes. She is other gaze, queer gaze, trans gaze, intersectional gaze, non-gaze.” (Soloway, 2016). Jill Soloway’s concept of the female gaze begs the question, “Does this content exist, and, if so, what does it look like?”

When searching for the female gaze in film, the suggestions usually tend towards mainstream, gender-reversed action films or films with “strong female leads”. These films have continuously proven themselves to be yet more constructions of the male gaze. In particular, gender-reversal films depend on the patriarchal expectations they try to criticize (Parker, 2015). Denis Villeneuve’s film *Sicario* (2015) exemplifies this. Marketed as being a female-lead action film, the story revolves around an FBI agent, played by Emily Blunt, who struggles to find her place amongst male DEA agents as they attempt to take down a Mexican drug lord. The film’s representation of women is less than limiting, as the only two female speaking roles go to Emily Blunt and an unnamed Mexican housewife. Blunt’s character is repeatedly used and abused for the sake of her male co-stars’ objective. She is violently assaulted by men twice, once after becoming intimate (a theme constantly seen in horror films), and yet fails to receive basic human empathy from anyone, except her partner, Reggie (Daniel Kaluuya). Her character is almost completely passive through the entirety of the film, and when she tries to use the little agency she has, she is yelled at, blamed or physically threatened. Further, the franchise’s decision to create a sequel without Blunt’s character contributes to the film’s themes of women being disposable (Mendelson, 2017). *Sicario*, offensively advertised as empowering to women, reveals some of the many issues with white, cis men directing and writing stories that are gender-reversed in an effort to “help” female representation.

A more complex construction of the male gaze can be seen in Patty Jenkins’ *Wonder Woman* (2017). With Jenkins being the first female director of a superhero film, there were high hopes for her revitalizing a genre dominated by men. While the film has its moments of female empowerment (mostly in Themyscira), the film fails to escape the male gaze. Jenkins faced an impossible battle of creating a female gaze while portraying a story written by a man, about a character created by a man, in a film produced by men. Diana’s (Gal Gadot) characteristics reinforce the male gaze rather than oppose it. Her undeniable beauty is not only central to her character, but also repeatedly mentioned by her male co-stars. The film imitates the way male characters ogle at her good looks by framing heavily on Diana’s body in revealing costumes. These scenes make Diana less of a hero than an object that is first admired for its beauty, and second for its strength. Diana’s character is also burdened with an overwhelming naivety of how the world

works. This is made more evident as soon as her male counterpart, and love interest, Steve Trevor (Chris Pine), is introduced. He has to teach her about everything from war and human nature to sex (Petit & Sarkeesian, 2017). Pine's character carries Diana through the film and, although she does not completely lose her agency, she is undermined by the fulfillment of the male gaze and her unawareness of the world.

It is clear that at this point, one must usually look outside the mainstream, especially Hollywood, to find films that achieve the female gaze. Sydney Freeland, a trans Navajo filmmaker, gives an optimistic example of what the female gaze could look like in her web series *Her Story* (2016). *Her Story* is a show about two trans women, Violet (Jen Richards) and Paige (Angelica Ross), who both have unexpected romantic encounters and must decide whether or not to give a chance on love. Their experiences are both complex and uniquely different. The show, containing only six episodes that in total run under sixty minutes, dives into the complexity of both female protagonists and the surrounding characters. It explores trans themes that are rarely seen in media: the struggle of finding love, opening up to partners and friends, support within the trans community, and discrimination faced within the LGBTQ community. The series is revolutionary in its depiction of trans women, who are usually abused, taken advantage of, laughed at in the media. It explores the female gaze, the trans gaze, the queer gaze and the "other" gaze. Sydney Freeland shows the audience what it has been like for years for trans women to be seen in the media, and simultaneously creates a gaze by trans women, onto trans women who gaze back at the audience. After lifetimes of misrepresentation, Sydney Freeland allows the spectator to witness these characters reclaim their bodies (Soloway, 2016) Having her second feature *Deidra & Laney Rob a Train* (2017) being released on Netflix last year, Sydney Freeland's career gives us hope that the female gaze will more frequently break into the mainstream.

Women of colour have been challenging the white, cis male gaze for years. Their domination of the female gaze can be seen in all forms of media from film (like Ava DuVernay's blockbuster *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018)) to music videos (like Beyoncé's "Formation" video, directed by Melina Matsoukas). One show that stands out is HBO's *Insecure* (2016) created by Issa Rae and Larry Wilmore. The show centers on the theme of contemporary black experiences, focusing on two female protagonists, best friends Issa

(Issa Rae) and Molly (Yvonne Orji). Through season one and two, Rae reinforces the concept of a more “authentic black female friendship”, one that is relatable and not otherized. Black women in the media are usually depicted as being “divas”, “angry” or as women who need to be helped or saved (particularly by white men). As the protagonists’ characters and relationships develop, Rae makes sure that one thing remains prevalent: they are regular people living life (Braxton, 2016). It is also rare that a friendship between two black women is shown as being supportive, as women of colour are frequently pinned against each other in the media (Okeowo, 2017). On top of this, the show explores female sexuality in a way that is unfiltered and ambitious. It is always done from the perspective of black women, something rarely seen on television. Issa Rae and executive producer/director Melina Matsoukas, with the help of cinematographers like Ava Berkofsky, successfully create a gaze that is female, black and intersectional. The characters are both dynamic and relatable to the point where the audience empathizes with them without feeling sorry for them.

As women in Hollywood become more vocal about inequality, one could hope that the female gaze will be more and more prevalent. To see the female gaze fulfilled, spectators must continue to question the media, specifically in terms of representation both in front and behind the camera. We must identify not only the women we see in media, but, more importantly, those we don’t. As Jill Soloway explains, the female gaze goes beyond “filmic language”; it is a “socio political, justice-demanding way of art making” (Soloway, 2016). Female audiences must demand art that benefits not just the female gaze, but also the queer gaze, the trans gaze, the disabled gaze, the POC gaze, the *other* gaze. Only when all of these gazes are equal in representation to male gaze, will the female gaze truly be achieved.

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