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**Full Length Research**

# Unpacking the Masculine Gaze: A Close Reading of Patriarchal Power Dynamics in Contemporary Film Narratives

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## Abstract

*In this paper, I would use the example of discrimination against women in the film industry to begin an in depth discussion of gender representation in modern cinema. Recently, several filmmakers have expressed concern over reported instances of misogyny in the industry. Several journalists have covered the issue, and many producers have even attempted to explain why women are portrayed differently. What's more, even women who have come out of the industry have been quite vocal about their experiences regarding gender discrimination. Looking at both filmmaking and reporting from a feminist perspective, where both men and women work together, I would like to scrutinize movies that take place in a liberal society and commercializes female bodies for publicity. This would also bring into contemplation the intricacy of representing women as more than mere objects. It's also common for female leads in female-oriented films to be portrayed in an utterly negative light. They are usually shown as antagonists, who desire to control other people's homes, and the only goal that they wish to achieve through subverting pre-established gendered power hierarchies is to dominate men.*

**Keywords:** Masculine Gaze: Power Relations, Cinematic Stories.

## INTRODUCTION.

Gender representation in modern day graphic narratives plays a significant role in the ways societies perceive and establish norms. One area that has received considerable attention within feminist film theory is the concept of a male gaze as coined in Laura Mulvey's seminal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). According to Mulvey, mainstream cinema is structured such that women are portrayed as the objects of male desire thereby creating a framework where males always act as viewing subjects and women are the viewing objects (Mulvey, 1975). In as much as Mulvey's scholars practically eliminated cinematic representations and misogyny from discussions about liberal feminisms, a fresh look at the concept of masculine gaze in relation to teamwork in modern cinema demonstrates both its evolutionary and persistent aspects. With the onset of the 21st century this view has increasingly been transformed

in terms of workings, with more complex constructs of identity being created, challenged and negotiated within a male dominated patriarchy (Kirkham et al., 2019; Stavrakopoulou, 2020; Tuchman, 2018).

The increase in the consumption of media through digital technology and streaming sites have led to a change in gender representation in movies and as such provide a basis for reevaluating the masculine gaze.

Modern-day directors are becoming more resistant to the restraints of the traditional gaze Concepts inherited to them (Mackey, 2021). This research does an analysis of how selected modern-day films interact with the masculine gaze and how they highlight the intersection of patriarchal narratives and the feminist and queer movements. This investigation will extend classic relationship of power, identity, and representation within

## 6. Int. J. Arts Humanit.

the story's context by employing film essays as its primary research tool.

### Background to the study

The gaze's discourse should not only be considered paramount to film theory, but in cultural theory, sociology and gender studies as well. Researchers and critics have developed Mulvey's idea to explore how the view shaped by men influences women's agency in the sociocultural sphere (Gledhill, 2018; Smith & Watson, 2017). Heterochirality effects, however, have come to the fore for the exploration of how race, sexuality, and class relations mediate within the view held by men to engender various forms of power and different experiences (Crenshaw, 2019; hooks, 2017).

The recent research presents evidence that the male gaze remains present in both Hollywood and Indie films claiming that although there is increased presence of women and other marginalized people the overhanging power structures still govern the depiction of people in films (McRobbie, 2018; Ritchie, 2017). Even as film scholars agree there are feminist and LGBTQ+ films, a majority of films still tend to portray men in dominance while women are submissive (Barker, 2021; Cuklanz, 2020).

The introduction of the Internet, however, has changed how audiences interpret what is presented to them and how they watch programs. As a result, contemporary definitions of gaze are more complicated than they were previously. These new engagement avenues, according to Dixon (2020) and Lister et al. (2017), have resulted in new narratives that subvert traditional gender representations in film, such as through transmedia narratives and interactive platforms. Hence it becomes easier to explore how changes narratives of a story or the engagement with an audience can challenge a masculine gaze with the new technologies.

The representation of different genders in films has more layers of complexities concerning power relations, identity politics, and cultural ideologies in the current era. This study will examine how contemporary visual narratives reinforce and deconstruct the traditional norms associated with gender roles within the Australia context by analyzing through the conceptual metaphor of Masculine gaze.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender in film has recently become a subject of academic critique, especially in relation to the 'male gaze,' a concept that continues to develop as norms change in society. This understanding of masculinity by the film audience to enact Mulvey's ideology is grounded in this work: filmual constructs femininity because it aims to please men as per its ideology, creating a territory where

women perform men's dreams, and this ideology is patriarchal. In relation to this, recent works expand this understanding and provide a detailed analysis of the gendered gaze in male dominated stories.

However, this has not been the case with Euro American cinema, where stereotypical portrayals of women continue, especially with regard to mainstream films, as Cuklanz notes (2020), there are always calls for more representation of diverse characters but the status quo remains relatively unchanged. Mackrey (2021), says that there lack female directors in these "bigger" movements and even the ones who are in power still possess male controlled perspectives. Kirkham et al. note that although it is needed more than ever, the 'masculine gaze' seems to be pervasive across western films 'and... is needed.'

In addition, classical intersectionality was able to take on board how race, class and sexual orientation explain the way a gaze operates. Through her work Crenshaw (2019) has established that women of color are often subjected to a more complex aspect of objectification that serves as a blind spot for mainstream discourses. There is also a punch in this intersectional argument made by hooks (2017) which shows that Black women have especially been side lined in the feminist conversation as well as film representation.

The emergence of streaming platforms has drastically changed the nature of audiences and engagement with the content providing scope for more multifaceted stories to be told. According to Dixon (2020), new ways of talking are possible due to the emergence of the digital and these seek to subvert the male gaze and create stories and formulations that are feminist and that celebrate the agency of the viewer. Lister et al. (2017) similarly contend that transmedia storytelling restructures the experience for the viewers resulting in stories with more intricate characters who can play out multiple gender dimensions.

As much as new technologies can promote representation, they are equally challenging, such sites analyze the potential of content algorithms which gives preference to the main story over emerging voices, diversity and novel narratives (McRobbie, 2018). Such critiques suggest the complex relationship between what audiences want, which is being themselves on screen and the practices in the industry which are still male gaze intuitive (Ritchie, 2017).

Considering queer and feminist narratives, some researchers have started observing the uniqueness of new gender narratives which actively subvert the gender order. For instance, Stavrakopoulou (2020) elucidates that in the current times, some filmmakers purposefully subvert the gaze by characterizing those in authority as multi-layered and twisted instead of a unidimensional conception. This fits in to wider debates regarding the ways in which contemporary cinema is beginning – or is it already – to practice intersectional feminism by providing for other representations that aim at undermining the male gaze (Barker, 2021).

The literature does show breadth conceptualizing and examining the masculinist lens in film but equally narrates its persistence with new counter narratives built in response to the now dominant masculinist lens. Newer narratives of the gendered power dynamics and its representation definitely warrant the scrutiny of the portrayal of the more contemporary filmmakers in relation to the reinforcing and resisting forces of patriarchy.

## **THEORETICAL CONCEPTION**

Let this analysis be grounded in a theoretical framework that belongs to feminist film studies, in particular, looking at masculine gaze as a tool that interprets modern day films. As established in Mulvey's (1975) iconic essay, 'The Male Gaze' is a feministic epistemology that regards women in male-dominated societies as passive subjects whose primary role is to be visually enjoyed by men.

Using Mulvey's approach as a starting point, this study proposes an account of intersectionality, as developed by Crenshaw (2019), highlighting the need to incorporate other axes of identity in addition to gender, including race, nationality, and class. By introducing intersectionality, the analysis recognizes that not all women share the same patterns of representation and that there exist different strategies to negotiate away from micro politics centered on gender and power relations in films.

Also, the research incorporates recent analysis derived from digital media sociology that critiques the role of technology on representation. Dixon (2020) and Lister et al. (2017) have examined the emergence of non-normative discourses through Netflix, social media and other platforms. This theoretical perspective modernizes the concept of identity and representation in the digital context which advances the treatment of modern films which are oriented at displacing the masculine gaze.

Within this framework, the study seeks to demonstrate how these visual stories contribute to and mirror changing ideas in society, as well as how they fit with and provide balance to the wider discourse of gender and power in more modern cinema, through a wider lens of the evolution of gender norms within film.

The researcher will undertake the selected contemporary films in detail and elaborate how to gaze works in these films in the first instance and where this gaze is contested and subverted.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study utilizes a qualitative literary analysis of select films within the last five years alongside other macro factors such as industry specifics and audience reception in order to analyze setting elements like cinematography, character interactions, and dialogue and

their subsequent reinforcement or subversion of traditional gender roles. Using Mulvey's male gaze within the movie, alongside an intersectionality-focused analysis, the film along with the other factors mentioned will be used to contextualize the movie within a historical and sociocultural setting to look for any potential agency or objectification within race, class and sexuality in relation to gender. The film will be studied to analyze any evolution within the modern masculine gaze and in identifying it, this analysis would aim to reduce its prevalence. This analysis would sift through the masculine objectification of women over the years and aim to pinpoint episodes that resonate with disruption at its core.

## **DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS:**

### **Intersectionality, Representation, and the Challenge of the Masculine Gaze.**

The variability in social notions such as race, class, gender and sexuality all together form intersectionality, which in this context, is pivotal as the mentioned social components also affect agency, emotions and powers, and are all simultaneously affected by the perception of others, and served with added layers of over exaggeration as seen in modern cinema.

### **Understanding Intersectionality through the Lens of Representation**

The notions of intersectionality aid in the creation and portrayal of movies, as seen in films such as *Get Out*, *Parasite* or *Crazy Rich Asians* that delve into the adventures of an ethnic minority. It accentuates the harsh realities that these respective persons and societies go through.

In "Get Out" as well as in their confrontation against Black erasure specifically in the US and Britain, Peele shows how the Black body has been turned into an object and a mere add-on decor for Whites and their culture, as well as commodified in his film – correctly determining America's fetishism of black bodies. There exists a gaze and criticism to that gaze and this stern criticism of the gaze is a precise way how intersectionality affects representation. Black culture is fetishized, whose existence is only visible if they are subjugated to racism, racially owned, as ironically, 'sex' is the sole facet of intersectionalism that for some reason always prevails.

As much as the narrative follows Rachel helping her single mother raise herself in America as a Chinese American, *Crazy Rich Asians* breaks the usual construction of a middle-class family in a notably feminist manner. The film challenges how important representation is by constantly reemphasizing the significance of Rachel's view in a multi-faceted culture.

## 8. Int. J. Arts Humanit.

The examination of the movie with regard to the social stratification of Asian Americans and their cultural diversity within the elite one percent and their opportunities to climb further up the social ladder perfectly depicts these intersections of race and socio-economic status.

The 2019 film sparks a much more profound and emotional comment on social class and disparity linking multiple facets of identity. Society's stark stratifications and Joon-ho's intelligent cinematography portray the day-to-day struggles of people further down the social pyramid, highlight the divide that exists between different classes and shedding light to the multitude of realities that multi-dimensional social mobility entails. Roughly speaking, the elite 1% are able to exert a strong withdrawal of control over the working class within shops and larger labor unions which help reshape the ever-evolving intersectional power structure.

Movies such as Blade Runner 2049, Mad Max Fury Road and Parasite significantly shift the stereotype that men have been navigators of power in cinema, but rather men and women share equal respect and agency in the story of the movies.

### Genre Interplay and Storytelling

The selected films also demonstrate an openness to play with genre, resulting in forward-looking and refreshing stories that subvert notions of representation and agency as we know them to be.

**"Get Out"** Among the Horror Films: In this film, Jordan Peele integrates the horror genre to examine topics related to identity, power, and representation. The movie integrates the uses of horror in context with lynching and white supremacy and in doing so, it obliterates the idea of the horror genre being a white middle class concept.

**"Crazy Rich Asians"** Along the Rom-Com Spectrum: The film's greater understanding of cultural context and economic status disregards the usual romantic comedy conception. The film makes several jokes where there is an interaction with other ethnic practices and a difference in wealth, and in doing so, the use of humor disavows the idea of rom coms being just feel good flicks.

**"Parasite": The Social Thriller:** In Parasite, Bong Joon-ho makes use of social thriller elements alongside comedy to provide a new perspective dealing with the economic gap and changing society in an engaging way. Here again, the use of thriller elements that involve the concept of class struggles and working displaces the idea that social thrillers have to be genuine and rational.

### Intersectionality, Representation and Power

The chosen films constitute a more complex portrayal of the intersections of identity and its representational and political elements. They incorporate identity intersectionality, which facilitates a better and broader comprehension of the challenges faced by individuals and communities.

**Intersectional Power Relations:** The selected films give insight into intersectional understanding of the power dynamics and the agency. By concentrating on the intersections of different identities, the films show how power is shared and exercised.

**Representation and Power Context:** The films capture the complex relationship that exists between representation and power. These films instead, attempt to deconstruct ideas of power of representation and agency by amplifying the voices and experiences of people of the margins.

**Feminist subversion of the male gaze:** The selected films challenge the older imaging of power relations and agency therefore providing a better comprehension of the nature of power and representation.

## CONCLUSION

The films selected in the study clearly break this narrative of projection of a masculine gaze shifting the focus on identity, agency portrayal and power structures at play. And this all comes down to intersectionality as a concept that emancipation from the feminist lullabies allows us to understand how race, class, gender and even sexuality work together, or against, people.

**Intersectionality and Representation:** The studied films adopt the aspects of intersectionality and its value in representation thus providing a more rational depth of how people and communities are experienced and placed in their intersections.

**Subverting The Masculine Gaze:** The films portray an effort to challenge stereotypical power recruitment and its deployment so as to enhance the understanding of power, representation and their overlaps.

**Genre Bending Storytelling:** The films depict a spirit of experimenting with genre instead of mere seeking representation within it thereby eroding the boundaries of traditional representation and agency.

**Future Research Recommendations:**

**Intersectionality and Film Representation:** Explore the manner in which intersectionality shapes film representation and its critique.

**Relocating the Gaze:** A Comparative study: Appraise the ways in which the films seek to defy the conventional masculine gaze and what this alteration of power dynamics entails.

**Genre Bending Storytelling:** A Quest: Examine the function of genres in the defiance of representation in filmmaking and agency hiring.

**The Future of Representation in Film:** Outlined is the evolution in great storytelling and representation for film that is fit for the cinema of the future.

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