

The Research on the Gaze Theory and Feminist Film

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Abstract. Feminism is a social theory and political movement created and initiated to end sexism, sexual exploitation, discrimination, oppression and to promote equality for the sexual class, focusing on the analysis of gender inequality and the promotion of the rights, interests, and issues of the sexual underclass in addition to the critique of social relations. Feminist film theory grew out of the feminist movement, critiquing the stereotypical images of women portrayed in the classic cinema while also exploring how to reproduce female subjectivity and desire in film. Taking two films, *Malèna* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* as research subjects, this paper explicates Laura Mulvey's opinions on Freudian psychoanalytic theory as well as Lacanian mirror theory through the ideas presented in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, contrasts the equality of the male gaze and the gaze under her lens, summarises the recent characteristics of women's film production today: the female figure becomes the subject of the film narrative through the story of women's growth; the narrative of the relationship between female figures breaks the patriarchal order, and explores the role of female consciousness in feminist cinematography.

Keywords: Film theory; Feminism; *Malèna*; *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*.

1. Introduction

Feminist film, which initially established itself in the early 1970s, became an important theoretical and critical field at the turn of modern Western film theory. However, most of the current studies on feminist cinema have been limited to the introduction of Laura Mulvey's theories and have paid insufficient attention to the new developments in emerging feminist cinema.

This essay focuses on the male gaze and the equality of the gaze under feminist film theory. The essay is divided into four chapters. The first chapter is introduction, which gives a brief overview. The second chapter is a brief overview of feminist film theory, which provides the development of feminism. Based on Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, this essay explains the formation process of gaze theory and its importance in feminist film theory. The third chapter, Male gaze and gaze equality, compares the traditional male gaze perspective in *Malèna* and the equality of the gaze in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, and explores new explorations of gaze theory in feminist cinema. Finally, it explores the recent characteristics women's cinematography today, thus demonstrating that women's film theory and practice have greatly enriched and deepened film theory, and are indispensable for the creation and development of film theory.

2. Brief Overview of Feminist Film Theory

2.1 The Development of Feminism

'Feminism', according to the dictionary, is "those who defend women's rights". Women's right to equality at work, reproductive rights (mainly contraception and abortion) and other political, economic and cultural rights became the focus of women's attention in the 1960s, and with the rise of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM), the term 'Feminism' became a term of pride for feminists fighting for their gender rights [1].

Feminist film theory and criticism began to emerge in the late 1960s under the influence of the "second wave" of feminism. In the early 1970s, feminist film theory gradually established itself in the field of film studies, becoming an important theoretical and critical field in the turn of modern Western film theory. In the 1960s and 1970s, feminist film theory inherited many of the issues

discussed in feminism and film studies, such as the shaping of women's identities and images by patriarchal culture, the inequalities experienced by women themselves, the division of labor between men and women in the arts, as represented by Hollywood (with movie stars and directors as typical examples), the gender stereotypes in film, and other social issues. It is a critique and analysis of the film industry system, revealing the oppression and exploitation of women in the production of film culture in classical Hollywood, and on this basis, it put forward such constructive creative, theoretical and critical ideas as "female collective creation" and "anti-cinema", and a considerable number of theorists engaged in creative and critical practice, which not only gave birth to the school of feminist film theory but also greatly enriched and deepened feminist theory and practice.

2.2 Laura Mulvey and Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema

Before the 1970s, Laura Mulvey was a pioneering filmmaker; after the 1970s, she became a film researcher and one of the most influential feminist film theorists, most notably in her article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'[2] published in the journal *Screen* [3], together with a series of related articles in the journal, provided a solid ground for feminist film criticism [4].

In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey suggests that the cinematic camera is essentially a representation of the male gaze. She focuses on classic Hollywood films, in which women are treated as objects to be viewed to satisfy the male gaze through the cinematographic camera, and in which women exist more as symbols, or even as consumer goods for the catharsis of male desire. She argues that women should not become objectified beings, but rather become real subjects who create meaning. This essay is a seminal work in feminist film theory.

2.2.1 Psychoanalysis

Laura Mulvey begins this paper by asking "where and how cinema's fascination is informed by a pattern of realized existence of fascination that has long been at work within the individual subject and the social constitution that shapes it" [5], aiming to analyze the relationship between the individual and the environment in cinema through psychoanalysis to find out where narrative cinema's. The aim is to find out where the "visual pleasure" of narrative cinema comes from through psychoanalysis of the relationship between the individual and the environment.

Mulvey uses two main psychoanalytic concepts in her paper: first, phallocentrism. According to Mulvey, the male is relying on the emasculated image of the female to enrich his image, to order the world and objectify the female, to measure the female by male standards, and thus give authority and meaning to the world of the self. The psychoanalytical explanation for the transformation of women into objects of male subjugation is the fear of the absence of male genitalia. The second is "castration anxiety". The text shows that the role of women in the formation of the patriarchal unconscious is twofold. On the one hand, there is the "castration anxiety" that arises from the lack of male genitalia, while on the other hand, the child is transformed into a desire to have male genitalia. However, when the woman completes this process, her children become part of the male dominant force that in turn enslaves the woman.

2.2.2 Visual Pleasure and Its Generation Mechanism

Firstly, Mulvey borrows from Freud's psychoanalytic theory of voyeurism. Freud believed that pleasure could be derived from the act of looking and that it was a sexual instinct to look at others and to use this as one's sexual stimulus. This voyeuristic desire is controlled in everyday life.

Mulvey argues that the audience's viewing of characters through the footage in the darkened environment of the cinema easily creates a sense of prying into the secrets of others, reinforcing and releasing the 'voyeurism'. The characters on the screen are subjected to a curious and controlling gaze, and the actresses are no exception. They are subjected to the scrutiny of the camera and the male perspective outside the camera, and this voyeurism turns them into symbolic commodities, even consumed as erotic objects for the audience, deprived of their meaning and sense of autonomy as women. Mulvey proposes a "triple viewing" in cinema, arguing that the camera's view, the view of the male protagonist in the film, and the view of the off-screen audience all point to one object, the

objectified and landscaped female figure. Through this triple male dominant viewing, the viewer is given the illusion of control over the narrative.

Secondly, Lacan's mirror theory also provides some insight into the formation of the male perspective in cinema and, together with Freud's 'voyeurism' theory, constitutes a source of viewing pleasure in Hollywood films. According to Lacan's mirror theory, when a child first looks in the mirror, he or she feels a thrill when seeing himself or herself in the mirror, because the reflection is often more perfect than the real self. Thus, people are stimulated by this pleasure to identify with the projection in the mirror as their ideal image, or even as a 'self' that is more real than their physical existence. This theory was extended by Mulvey to the construction of a theory of women's cinema.

The male protagonists act as objects of self-image projection for the audience. They are often the more perfect, attractive and powerful ideal selves, and in contrast to the passivity, powerlessness and weakness of the female characters, they naturally become the objects of self-image projection for the audience. The male protagonist in traditional cinema acts as the driving force of the story and as a witness, giving the male audience a great sense of narcissistic identification and solace.

2.2.3 Gender and Narrative

Mulvey argues that in narrative cinema, the female figure as object and other has been used as a symbol of desire, a sexual code, they are stylized to carry male desire and passively become objects to be seen, but beyond the traditional narrative model the female in cinema has only two roles: "as an erotic object for the characters in the screen story and as erotic object for the audience in the auditorium; thus there is a constantly shifting tension between the two sides of the screen" [5]. The film is no longer interrupted in its narrative by the presence of an erotic object; the presence of the female as a second sexual on the screen attracts the gaze of both the subject on the screen and the audience in the cinema, two subjects whose perspectives merge into one, who are free of contradiction because they are viewing the same erotic object. This is a heterosexual division of active and passive labor, as the naked spectacle, the female figure is controlled by the power of the male character, who happens to be identified with the power of the spectator and gives his desire to the controller, because, as mentioned earlier in the mirror theory, for the spectator the male character happens to be the imaginary more perfect image in the mirror, thus the male character becomes the bearer of the spectator. The male character takes the place of the audience and can take more control and initiative than the audience, thus taking control of the narrative rhythm. The cinematic technique can also play its part in creating a natural environment in which the male character creates the illusion of being the sole viewer and derives the pleasure of looking from the female figure being looked at. As a result, these two images have become the narrative template for mainstream commercial cinema. Firstly, by using the actions and adventures of the male protagonists and heroes as the objects of representation, the illusion of space-time continuity is created through the image sequences, allowing the audience to hold a high level of tension for the plot; secondly, while the male characters are at the center of the drama, the missing female body is highlighted, making the female body an object to be possessed by male desire. It is the intersection of these two narrative mechanisms that successfully seduces the viewer into watching.

3. Male Gaze and Gaze Equality

This paper focuses on *Malèna* by Giuseppe Tornatore and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* by Céline Sciamma as means of exploring the themes and characteristics of women's cinema through the standard male gaze perspective of the mainstream cinema lens, compared to the equality of the gaze conveyed in modern feminist cinema.

3.1 The Traditional Male Gaze Perspective in *The Legend of Sicily's Beauty*

Malèna, directed by Giuseppe Tornatore, uses the perspective of Renaldo, the male protagonist of the film, to tell the story of Malèna, a beautiful young woman in Sicily, Italy, during the Second World War, showing how a woman is reduced from a great beauty to the source of the disaster under

the invisible oppression of patriarchal society. From his perspective, it is clear how the camera, as a vehicle for the male gaze, objectifies women.

The film opens with subjective close-ups of Malèna buckling her garter belt and wearing high heels. These shots deconstruct the female figure into partial breasts, legs and face, dividing and displaying a complete figure through cinematic close-ups, thus satisfying the male pleasure of voyeurism of the female flesh. The female figure is thus transformed into a flattened patchwork of limbs, even as it reverts to the whole, rather than the organic, three-dimensional figure it was. Malèna is encoded in the film as a highly erotic symbol, bearing the desire to be seen not only by everyone in the film but also by the audience in front of the screen. At the same time, the film groups these close-ups with shots of the teenagers burning ants with a magnifying glass. The perspective of the magnifying glass is confined and nuanced, as is the close-up, allowing the teenagers to consume and watch as they wish, while what is in the space of the close-up and the magnifying glass is in the water. Malèna is coded as a woman constructed according to the male standard of beauty, but this construction has no meaning for her in itself, even if her overwhelming beauty becomes the source of her tragedy in the film. It is only when the men no longer desire Malèna that the women can live in harmony with such a mediocre Malèna. Malèna has compromised her beauty in exchange for a pass in a male-dominated society. There is no female rebellion in the film, nor can there be. In the oppressive patriarchal society, women are powerless and have to play by the rules of the male society [5].

Renaldo, the protagonist and Malèna's voyeur, undoubtedly represents the male voyeurism of the female body. He not only rides around the town with the older teenagers on his bicycle, searching for Malèna's allure and beauty but also spying on and monitoring her life. At the same time, he is the one who finds the courage to save Marlena when she falls into the abyss of her life. He satisfies both the voyeuristic desire of the male audience and his heroic role as the active protagonist who saves Marlena, as well as the ideal projection of the male audience.

3.2 The Equality of The Gaze in Portrait of a Lady on Fire

Portrait of a Lady on Fire is a film by French director Céline Sciamma. It tells the story of Marianne, a talented young woman painter who receives a commission to complete a portrait of a wealthy young lady Eloise before she is married, without her knowing. As time passes, love develops between them as they live together on an isolated island. Through the unique perspectives of the two female protagonists, the film shows the survival and psychological state of women in different times and attempts to explore women's perceptions of themselves and their identities in those circumstances.

This film, which appears to be about the forbidden love between two women in the 18th century and the embodiment of a sexual minority, is in essence a film of numerous intersections of vision that is not an indictment of the repressed humanity of the times, but about the equality of 'seeing', about how these two women resist the power gaze through love and transform it into an identity gaze [6].

In this story, there are no men on the island where Eloise lives, but men are always hidden under many social prohibitions and statutes. Eloise previously rejected all male painters who painted her portrait, and at this point the portrait becomes a vehicle for objectifying women and the fetters of a patriarchal society that imprisons and suppresses Eloise's subjectivity, and women become objects in patriarchal society. Eloise's behavior is resistance to refusing to objectify herself as an object under the male gaze. At this time the appearance of Marianne, also a woman, unlike her mother who was taken in by male society and arranged for her to be married off, symbolizes understanding and identification. However, the gaze that Marianne is casting at Eloise to complete the portrait is not dissimilar to that of the male painter, as they both fix on Eloise as an object on the canvas through their gaze. The relationship between the two gazes is very unequal at this point, manifesting itself in the first portrait as a gentle, voluptuous look that reveals the desire of the painter but is devoid of emotion and personality, almost fulfilling the characteristics of the female in the male perspective, a 'decisive male gaze that projects its fantasies onto the corresponding stylized female form' [7]. With the erasure of this vulgar image by her hand, Marianne's "male gaze" on Eloise as a painter begins to

disintegrate. The destruction of the tangible portrait in defiance of the invisible oppression of male society is a metaphor for the endless desire of the women in the film for freedom.

In the final scene, when Marianne looks at Eloise at the other end of the theatre and Eloise does not notice her gaze, the shot that should have been Marianne's subjective point of view moves forward and transforms into an objective shot, with Vivaldi's music playing and Eloise's eyes getting wet and occasionally smiling amidst the tears. The film revolves around Marianne's viewing, where the subjective camera dominates, and the final shift between the subjective and objective lenses frees the viewer from the character's perspective, completing an 'identification gaze' from the viewer to the character.

As a unique feminist film, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is a metaphor for the subjectivity and independence of women in figurative detail. Through the in-depth portrayal of the 'gaze' during the painting process, the film presents an artistic female perspective of equal 'seeing', which separates women from the shackles of the second sex and emphasizes the 'first sex' of women. It changes the perspective of the film from male scrutiny to the gaze of identity [8]. The film uses poetic audio-visual language to sublimate the emotional expression and narrative level of the film, deliberately abandoning the male perspective and expressing the delicate emotions of women as subjects of desire.

4. Recent Characteristics of Women's Cinematography Today

Through the analysis and comparison of the above two films, it can be concluded that most of the feminist cinematography today revolves around the following two points: firstly, how the female figure becomes the subject of the film narrative through the story of women's growth; secondly, how the narrative of the relationship between female figures breaks the patriarchal order, explaining the influence of the patriarchal social unconscious on traditional cinema and how feminist cinema deconstructs visual pleasure through narrative. This leads to the conclusion that the female figure is the core element of feminist film narratives and that deconstructing visual pleasure with the female figure is a new path for feminist film narratives [9].

The female figure and feminist cinema are complementary to each other. Due to the emergence and development of feminist cinema, the female figure has moved from its original subordinate position to a dominant one; at the same time, the female figure has opened up new paths for the narrative of feminist cinema. Firstly, the emergence of the female coming-of-age story established the female figure as the absolute subject of the feminist film narrative. Through the stories of women's growth, the films write chronicles of women: on the one hand, they record their struggle for independence and moral justice at each stage of their lives; on the other hand, they record the process of self-identification as women grow up. These processes are fraught with pain and difficulty, not only from external obstacles but also from women's internal struggles. This makes the narrative of women's coming-of-age stories run counter to the traditional cinematic purpose of providing visual pleasure, thus achieving the goal of deconstructing visual pleasure and liberating women from the male gaze. Secondly, the relationships between female figures are also a detail that feminist cinema focuses on, from friendship to intimacy, either of which is a great challenge to male privilege.

In summary, feminist cinema has opened up a new narrative path for feminist cinema by portraying women with a sense of independence and depicting the stories of women who are constantly seeking self-identity in the process of growing up, focusing on the relationships between the female figures, deconstructing visual pleasures with female figures. Feminist film theorists, in a burgeoning social movement, are inspired by this passion for the practice and at the same time face anxieties about the choice and creation of theory and methodology; however, they do not mechanically transport existing theories and interpret them in the field of film, but try to use critical practice to give voice to the cultural 'other' to which they belong, and attempt to strategically draw on certain 'grand theories' from the humanities to construct the framework and paradigm of feminist film criticism and theory. Their return to Hollywood film history to uncover neglected female film creators, their search for potential resistance to patriarchal discourses in historical texts, and their advocacy of women's collective

creation and "anti-cinema" implicitly or explicitly reveal an attempt and courage to rewrite women's film history and change the status quo of criticism and theory. More importantly, it reveals the researcher's own subjective consciousness and wisdom, which closely combines critical practice and theoretical construction, individual experience with the survival of the gender group to which they belong, and the rewriting of women's film history with realpolitik demands [10].

5. Conclusion

The feminist film theory originates from the feminist movement. It criticizes the stereotyped images of women in classic films, and also discusses how to reproduce women's subjectivity and desire in films. This paper expounds Laura Mulvey's views on Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Lacan's mirror image theory, compares the equality of male gaze and her gaze in camera, and summarizes the latest characteristics of women's film production today. In a word, feminist films have opened up a new narrative path for feminist films, shaped women with independent consciousness, and described the story of women constantly seeking self-identity in the process of growing up. Due to the emergence and development of feminist films, the female image has also changed from the original subordinate position to the dominant position, which has also opened up a new way for the narrative of feminist films. If future scholars want to do this research, they can increase the content of in-depth interviews, interview the views of different age and professional groups on feminist films, to grasp the impact of films on women and the interviewees' suggestions on the development of feminist films.

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