

Analysis of Female Gaze in Lesbian Films from the Perspective of Camera Language —Taking *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* as an Example

Yiqian Zhang

School of Television, Communication University of China, Beijing, China

100261@yzpc.edu.cn

Abstract. Western feminist film theory was formed in the 1960s and 1970s and it has been widely discussed since then. With the help of Freud's psychoanalysis, Laura Mulvey analyzes the interweaving of erotic pleasure in film, its meaning, and the central place of the image of the woman. At the same time, the improvement of film technology and photography methods provide more chances for female spectators to seek pleasure as counterparts in films. The lesbian film is a category that crosses many film genres and highlights female subjectivity. Both female characters and spectators can be the subject of different kinds of gaze, looking at others while experiencing the story about a woman's affection. Based on Freud's psychoanalysis and Laura Mulvey's theory, this paper analyzes how camera language embodies the female gaze in Céline Sciamma's lesbian film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019). The study of interaction among the camera, the character, and the spectator is of great significance in the realization of the female gaze, which can be inspired for future films, especially feminist films, to stress the value of female roles and pay attention to female spectators' emotions.

Keywords: *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*; Female Gaze; Feminism; Psychoanalysis; Camera Language.

1. Introduction

The stereotype of women portrayed in classic Hollywood films is increasingly criticized by feminists since the 1960s. Female directors are also constantly exploring ways to break the male gaze and promote the female gaze in feminist films and create complex female characters that resonate with female spectators. In female-centered lesbian films, female desire and gaze are highlighted distinctively, because the dominant male character and spectator in traditional films are not in an important position. Camera language which shows the female gaze in lesbian films can be a typical example of representing women's roles, which can be applied to other film genres to promote gender equality in film and society.

There are three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion [1]. By taking *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* as an example, this paper analyzes three main subjects of the female gaze in lesbian film: camera, character, and spectator, and how they are presented by camera language.

2. The camera's emphasis on the female perspective

Mulvey suggested that in a patriarchal culture, women are imposed on the silent image as bearers of meaning, not makers of meaning. In traditional Hollywood genre cinema, the female figure is treated as a spectacle, confined in the symbolic order of phallogentrism, without subjectivity. "A woman's film is a movie that places at the center of its universe a female who is trying to deal with emotional, social, and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that she is a woman [1]." The use of the camera in lesbian films has changed this reality; in which the camera acts as female eyes and transfers information from female perspectives. Point-of-view shot of Marianne in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is constantly used in introducing the background, advancing the plot, and showing the affection of the protagonists.

2.1 Leading into the story background from the perspective of the heroine

The beginning of a lesbian film, like *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, revolves around the female perspective, and the audience follows the female characters in the situations portrayed in the film. The romantic story of Marianne (Noémie Merlant) and Héloïse (Adèle Haenel) happens on a small island, and the memory of Marianne starts on a boat. The shot-reverse-shot sequence, as well as the point-of-view shot of Marianne, shows she is on a boat with five male sailors. Spectators follow her point of view to see the wooden box floating on the sea, and she jumps into the water and takes it back. In this scene, the camera shakes up and down with the rhythm of waves, which makes the spectator feel the same way as Marianne in the sea, suturing them into her perspective. At last, a long shot points out that Marianne board on the island where the whole story happens.

2.2 Suspense setting and plot advancement

The director Céline Sciamma sets up a lot of suspense in Héloïse's image, and the first meeting of Marianne and Héloïse establishes a deeper relationship between them and promotes the further development of the story. In the perspective of Marianne, spectators can see a woman with a hood open the door and step out. Then the camera tracks Héloïse in the back, and the reverse shot shows Marianne following her, looking at her. The shaky camera simulates Marianne's view as they run until Héloïse stops by the cliff and turns around. At this moment, both the character and spectators' curious gaze are fulfilled after a series of shots. The camera acts as the eye to both see and represent the female image, which is not erotic but objective.

2.3 A delicate expression on female identification and emotion

The mirror stage, according to French psychiatrist Jacques Lacan, is when a young kid (between the ages of six and eighteen months) first develops a concept of identity. The image that looks to be superior to and more in charge of itself in the mirror reflection, however, leads to an important misidentification. Mulvey's theory mentions that male audiences in traditional movies identify with male characters through the screen, create their ideal selves, and obtain pleasure.

In lesbian films, by using a point-of-view shot, the mirror and the reflection can be a strong symbolic image to show the female gaze and self-identification of female protagonists. In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Marianne looks at herself in the mirror that is put between Héloïse's legs and portrays her image in a book. In this scene, Marianne identifies herself by the reflection in the mirror that is put against Héloïse's naked body and draws it down under Héloïse's gaze. It is a process of a woman knowing herself and reproducing herself and pouring emotions into a soulful connection under the gaze of loving eyes. They understand that the affection between them could never be fulfilled in that times, and their deep attachment to each other is expressed at the very moment in the way of the portrait. The camera acts as eyes to represent the protagonist's own self, the lover's self, and helps spectators outside the screen to suture into the scene.

3. Gaze between characters

The gaze of female characters on themselves in the plot narrative, the gaze of female characters on women, the gaze of female characters on male characters, and even the gaze of children, all fall under the category of character-to-character gaze [2]. In classic Hollywood films, female characters are usually dominated by the controlling male gaze within the cinematic apparatus, acting as an objective spectacle without subjectivity. In lesbian films, firstly, the gaze is largely confined to female protagonists. In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the absence of a male character provides more space for the female gaze, both Marianne and Héloïse are subjects and objects of the gaze, thus emphasizing the equality of giving and gaining in lesbian desire and relationship.

3.1 Mutual gaze between female characters

There are close-ups that show Marianne observing Héloïse's ears and hands, in order to portray her without being perceived. On the surface, Marianne is the painter, and Héloïse is her model, the object of her observation and painting. But in fact, the relationship between them is not the subject-object relationship of "painting and being painted", but the relationship of mutual subject and mutual gaze. In the plot Marianne tells Héloïse about her behavior and the emotion hidden behind it, the shot-reverse-shot sequence shows they are in the same position on two sides. And when Marianne walks to the side of Héloïse, the camera pushes in to highlight her expressions that are being watched by Héloïse. Thus, in the end, there is no subject and object in the portrait, it is a work that they create together.

3.2 Equality in a symmetrical composition

In lesbian films, the relationship of equality is maintained, and the pursuit of equal giving and demand is presented. Therefore, the director uses a lot of symmetrical compositions to show the eye contact between the characters gazing at each other, thus emphasizing the equality of status in this relationship.

The symmetrical composition with a flat angle and relatively stable camera movements also objectively represents the scene and characters, without the director's judgment. Marianne is a painter who is hired to portray the lady Héloïse, while Sophie (Luàna Bajrami) is a housemaid. But the camera does not emphasize the status of their relationship, especially when Marianne and Héloïse are together. In the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, which plays an important role in understanding Marianne and Héloïse's love, Eurydice's subjectivity is always ignored, and their ending that turning back is the result of their mutual choice. When they talk by the sea, play the piano, and kiss each other, the symmetrical composition and medium close-up shot put them in equivalent position in the picture. And the camera movement tend to be static long take, leading the spectators to immerse into their conversation and emotion, and the affectionate gaze dismisses patriarchal control.

4. The spectator's gaze towards characters

4.1 Getting pleasure through the way of masquerade

Mulvey acknowledged that female viewers can definitely connect with the masculine gaze onscreen a few years after the publication of *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, but that this identification involves a type of gender masquerade or "transvestitism." [5]. And Mary Ann Donne argued that "for the female spectator there is a certain over-presence of the image – she is the image" [6]. She agrees those female viewers might want to identify with the powerful male which requires pretending to be male. However, she also says that female spectators often view the female characters onscreen, with their excessively "feminine" and eroticized presentation, as performing a kind of masquerade. Masquerade "constitutes an acknowledgment that it is femininity itself which is constructed as mask" and therefore allows the female spectator to distance herself from the excessively feminine object onscreen, or rather, to destabilize her image [6]. These characters are performing or pretending to be the erotic female, and because the female viewer can see that this is a performance, she can step back and not identify with that character. There is pleasure in seeing that erotic femininity is a kind of mask. It is not "real."

4.2 Direct emotional identification with female characters

E. Ann Kaplan notes that "the gaze is not necessarily male (literally), but to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the 'masculine' position" [7]. In lesbian films such as *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the male character is almost absent, and the centrality of the female characters makes it easier for female spectators to gain emotional recognition and the pleasure of "watching". Through subjective perspectives and relatively constant camera

movement, the audience empathizes with the female characters in the film. In the plot in which Sophie has an abortion, the close-up shot shows her facial expression is in pain, and a baby is holding her hand, touching her face. Sophie cries. The female spectators can understand that Sophie's tears are not due to pain, but to her motherly instincts of guilt and regret for her child, out of the emotional resonance of being a woman. Meanwhile, the close shot presents that Marianne could not bear to watch this scene, while Héloïse persuades her to look at Sophie. On the one hand, female spectators can stand in Sophie's shoes to feel the suffering of a mother losing a child. On the other hand, Marianne's bystander perspective also makes the spectators feel a deep sense of sympathy.

This set of shots that represent life and death in the film returns the right to reproduction to women, who are free to build identity and friendship across class, and free to choose to nurture life or give it up. The male gaze is downplayed, and the humanism of the feminist work is strongly expressed [8]. By creating full-bodied female characters, female spectators don't have to use the way of masquerading or putting on a feminine mask to identify with the male protagonist, because the character is a real woman, with authentic emotions. Thus, female spectators can gain sympathy or a different life experience.

4.3 The pleasure of female spectators looking at female characters

The term "scopophilia" refers to the pleasure of seeing. Scopophilia is explained psychoanalytically by Freud as an innately enjoyable behavior that we are drawn to instinctively. In his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. Laura Mulvey suggested that scopophilia is a possible pleasure that cinema offers. But the mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world that unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and plan for their voyeuristic phantasy [1]. Also, the role of the camera lens instead of the human eye and the darkness of the cinema auditorium enhance the illusion of voyeurism.

In classic Hollywood films, women onscreen are usually embodying to-be-looked-at-ness. They are framed as objects of the male gaze and sexual desire, and the movie camera works as a tool to invite the spectator to identify with male characters. Teresa de Lauretis departs from Mulvey's assertion that spectatorship is invariably male by using Hitchcock's *Rebecca* and *Vertigo* as examples to conceptualize the female spectator. It should be able to work through these codes in order to shift or redirect identification toward the two positionalities of desire that characterize the female's Oedipal condition if the spectator's identification is engaged and directed in each movie by distinct cinematic-narrative codes. Here she thinks that the female child also has her desire for mother and never completely gives it up. Thus woman's desire tends to be more bisexual and ambiguous [9-10]. In lesbian films, women are both the initiators of desire and the bearers of the gaze. This kind of female gaze abandons the unequal relationship of the male gaze and looks at and portrays women in a way that finds beauty and love.

In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Marianne observes Héloïse's facial expressions and body movements in detail in order to portray her. In this process, the spectator's perspective follows Marianne's eyes to gaze at Héloïse, which is of pure curiosity and artistry. For example, there are close-ups showing that Marianne looks at Héloïse's ears, hands and face and puts them down on the manuscript. The lesbian aspires to take control of the seeing apparatus and create room for the feminine libido outside of prevailing patriarchal frameworks at the same time that women no longer play the role of male others in a patriarchal culture. The spectator is thus encouraged to empathize with Marianne and Héloïse's lesbian desires-aligned gaze, which actively resists the patriarchal and heteronormative sexualization of women onscreen.

Furthermore, the woman image onscreen usually reminds the spectator of the castration threat, which stresses the male position of authority in a patriarchal society. In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, male influence can be strong in many parts of Marianne and Héloïse's lives, like in their work and marriage. But in their love, the male role is largely ignored and the spectators can feel their pleasure

by watching their images. Instead of taking a woman as an erotic object by shooting part of their body like legs or breasts in traditional films, lesbian films tend to discover and manifest the beauty of female form. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* emphasizes the art form of oil painting both in terms of camera language and film content, highlighting the beauty of women as creators and subjects of art. The relationships of the female characters are presented as equals in the film, and the female spectator is free to take voyeuristic pleasure as the subject of looking, thus realizing the female gaze.

5. Conclusion

In a film market dominated by male directors and male characters, breaking the male gaze has far-reaching implications for creating classic female screen images and meeting the needs of female audiences. The lesbian film, as a category of niche subject matter centered on female characters, is easily overlooked. However, it has significant value in the representation of the female figure and the realization of the female gaze. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is an excellent feminist lesbian film, that uses highly expressive camera language to portray female characters and emphasize the female perspective in three ways: the camera's gaze on the characters, the way the characters look at each other, and the way the spectator looks at the characters. The use of these camera languages for the representation of the female gaze is not only limited to lesbian films but also has implications in other genres of cinema. Exploring different forms of the female gaze, it helps female characters onscreen to escape the passive position of being watched and becoming spectacle, and thus to gain the subjectivity of looking. Female spectators can get more pleasurable experiences in films. Furthermore, the emphasis on female characters and perspectives helps to break down the oppression of women by patriarchy and the male gaze and has a profound impact both in the field of film art and on gender issues.

References

- [1] Mulvey, L. Visual pleasure and narrative cinema [J]. *Screen*, 1975, 16(3), 6-18.
- [2] Basinger, J. A woman's view: How Hollywood spoke to women, 1930-1960 [J]. 1993. New York: Knopf.
- [3] Lacan, J. The Mirror-phase as formative of the Function of the I [J]. 1968. *New Left Review*, 51(51).
- [4] Liu Ping. A brief analysis of female gaze in the film *The Piano Lesson* [J]. *Writer*, 2014, (04): 161-162.
- [5] Mulvey, L. Afterthoughts on "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946) [J]. 1981. *Framework*, 15-17, 12-15.
- [6] Doane, M. A. Film and the masquerade: Theorising the female spectator [J]. 1982. *Screen*, 23(3-4), 74-88.
- [7] Kaplan, E. A. Women & film: Both sides of the camera [J]. 1983. *Methuen*. 37(4): 40-41.
- [8] Shan Zhixuan. The Idea of Egalitarianism in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* [J]. *New Record*, 2021 (18): 87-89.
- [9] De Lauretis, T. *Alice doesn't: Feminism, semiotics, cinema* [J]. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983.
- [10] De Lauretis, T. Eccentric subjects: Feminist theory and historical consciousness [J]. 1990. *Feminist studies*, 16(1), 115-150. 0, 30 (1): 158-160.