

# An Analysis of the Correct Use of Female Gaze from the Perspective of Gaze Theory -- A Case study of Portrait of a Lady on Fire

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**Abstract.** Feminism is currently popular, and there are an increasing number of feminist films attempting to promote this idea. Some scholars have expanded the theory of gaze into feministic fields, most notably Laura Mulvey, who proposed the concept of the male gaze. Following that, the theory of the female gaze was developed in response to the theory of the male gaze. However, the use of the female gaze in many films is incorrect, and the gaze theory lacks a clear definition of the female gaze. Using gaze theory, the study investigates the proper use of the female gaze in feministic films. First, the research points out some representations of the pseudo-female gaze: directors only change the protagonist's gender, transforming a male into a female with a female performing male functions; they maintain a male gaze while incorporating feminist themes; the portrayal of females is stereotypical and idealistic, not delving into their true inner thoughts. Then Taking the film Portrait of a Lady on Fire as an example, the outcome demonstrates that the correct female gaze used in films has the following characteristics: Characters can be aware of and object to the gaze; It is the gaze as equal seeing; It is the gaze that focuses on the feelings and experiences of the characters. All these characteristics can be used in future feministic films to help improve audiences' understanding of the female gaze and to help get rid of the pseudo-female gaze in films.

**Keywords:** Female Gaze, Gaze theory, Feministic Films, Portrait of a Lady on Fire.

## 1. Introduction

With the advancement of society, more and more people have become acquainted with the concept of feminism and advocate for it in a variety of ways, particularly in art forms such as films. Feminist films are becoming increasingly popular on the market. However, many feminist films include male gazes while claiming to be feminist films. Simultaneously, there are numerous excellent feminist films. To promote gender equality, they not only pay attention to the content but also use the female gaze to delve deeply into gaze theory, guiding the audience and spreading feminist ideas. Feminism, which began as a social movement, has had a huge impact on the film. Women's stereotypes in Hollywood films were criticized by early feminists. Claire Johnston is one of them, and she claims that classic films create an ideological image of women who are 'women' created for men [1].

Then, in Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking article 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema,' Mulvey proposed the concept of scopophilia (the desire to see) to explain the occurrence of ideal women in Hollywood films, which means that spectators, primarily men, are eager to see women, particularly women as sexual objectives [2]. Mulvey then examined the two sides of scopophilia, which are activity and passivity, implying that cinema portrays the male character as active and powerful [2]. In contrast, the female character is passive and powerless. Then the term "male gaze" has come to refer to the study of complex mechanisms in cinema, such as voyeurism, narcissism, and fetishism. Following this, researchers consider what constitutes a truly feminist film, and they believe that they should figure out what it means to be a woman and reconstruct female characters. As a result, the concept of the female gaze was introduced to respond to Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze," which is a gaze from female spectators, directors, and characters that is completely different from the "male gaze"[1]. However, Mulvey later argued in her essay that female spectators are not equal to the female gaze and that some still enjoy adopting the male point of view [2]. The question then becomes, what exactly is the female gaze? What concepts does the female gaze wish to convey? It not only refers to a female perspective that differs from the male gaze but also conveys other ideas.

Moreover, there is no research on how to use the real female gaze in films correctly, which is one of the issues addressed in this study. This study aims to define the true feminist film and the theory of the female gaze, as well as to investigate the proper use of the female gaze and promote gender equality. The research theme is to examine the female gaze in feminist films, particularly *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. The study focuses on the gaze theory and how it expresses gender equality. The theory of gaze was used in this study as the method. Moreover, the goal of the research is to investigate new feminist film expressions, such as the female gaze and define real feminist films and theories to promote the development of feminist films and, eventually, gender equality.

## 2. The theory of the gaze

In visual culture, the concept of gaze refers to how an audience perceives other people presented. The concept gained traction with the rise of postmodern philosophy and social theory, and it was first discussed by 1960s French intellectuals, specifically Michel Foucault's description of the medical gaze and Jacques Lacan's analysis of the gaze's role in the mirror stage development of the human psyche. This concept is expanded in the framework of feminist theory, where it can deal with how men perceive women, how women perceive themselves and other women, and the consequences of these perceptions [3].

Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze is one of the most prominent gaze theories advanced in her seminal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. According to Mulvey, she says: "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" [2]. Mulvey holds the opinion that women are passive erotic objects gazed at by active men. Moreover, she employs psychoanalysis to demonstrate that the source of the male gaze is scopophilia, which means the pleasure of looking, including erotic pleasure provided by the cinema. Female characters in those films typically have three characteristics: they are expected to be perfect, they are silly and always have no value, and they are erotic objects. The last one is a very common feature in films, also known as fan service, aimed at male audiences. In *Suicide Squad*, for example, the director panned the camera to show Harley Quinn's body while she is taking off her clothes while giving a short shot to the other two men who are also taking off their clothes.

*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, a 2019 film directed by Céline Sciamma about a lesbian relationship between an aristocrat and a painter hired to paint her portrait, is a good example of a feminist film that successfully breaks the male gaze and utilizes the female gaze.

## 3. The pseudo-female gaze in films

In addition to some excellent female gaze films, such as *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, there are numerous pseudo-female gaze films. While using feminist themes to disguise themselves, there are still male gazes hidden beneath them. Nowadays, male decision-makers see the potential profit of a female-led film but do not understand the true meaning of feminism. These films frequently appear in three forms. To begin, directors only change the protagonist's gender, transforming a male into a female with a female performing male functions. Most of these feminist films feature stereotypical heroes. Furthermore, some films only change overexposed women to men because male directors believe those female audiences will be pleased in the same way that male audiences are, even though they will not. One example is the film *Magic Mike*, which features a feast of naked men attempting to please females. Second, they maintain a male gaze while incorporating feminist themes. Like *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, French director Abdellatif Kechiche's 2013 film *Blue is the Warmest Color* narrates two women's love despite their different classes, but there are large segments of explicit sexual depictions from the male director's perspective, whereas, in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Céline

Sciamma depicts the sex between them implicitly. Third, the portrayal of females is stereotypical and idealistic, not delving into their true inner thoughts. Carol by Todd Haynes discusses women's marriages, desires, and emotions, but the overall tone of the film is too restrained, and the emotion between the two heroines is too weak. They ignored their feelings in favor of portraying two idealized and stereotyped women in the eyes of males [4]. Mulvey says: "The presence of a woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" [2]. Shots of the male gaze are frequently ineffective and can even influence the plot. Furthermore, some female characters are useless and contribute nothing to the plot. Pseudo-female gaze in films has attempted to solve these problems and involved feminism; however, they have only done so superficially and not fundamentally.

## **4. The real female gaze in Portrait of a Lady on Fire**

### **4.1 From male gaze to female gaze**

#### **4.1.1 Awareness of the gaze**

In Jean-Paul Sartre's book *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that gaze is "to become conscious of being looked at" [5]. In the female gaze, characters have conscious of being looked at while characters in the male gaze have not. There is a point-of-view shot of Héloïse when Marianne first meets her. Only Héloïse's back is visible to spectators from Marianne's eyes. Héloïse is hurriedly running while wearing a black cloak. Héloïse tells Marianne that she has dreamt of running for years, expressing her desire for freedom and her desire to flee patriarchal society's arranged marriages and the male gaze [6]. However, Marianne stealthily gazes at Héloïse to finish her portrait. Héloïse, though, is always aware of Marianne's gaze and sometimes gazes back. She even mistakes it for Marianne's love for her. This demonstrates that characters are aware of the gaze in the female gaze rather than simply being unconsciously gazed at in the male gaze.

#### **4.1.2 Objection to the male gaze**

In her essay, Mulvey makes the point that in the male gaze, males are active subjects, and women are passive objects [2]. At this point, people are painfully aware that they are objects being looked at as Sartre says: "In brief, what my apprehension of the Other in the world as being probably a man refers to is my constant possibility of being-seen-by-him, i.e." [5]. In this sense, the gaze can objectify people, invading their space, and attempt to impose authority over them by treating them like objects. Héloïse is tormented by the male gaze early in the movie. Her future husband will look at her through a portrait, and Mariann will look at her as well because her first portrait of Héloïse is a poor imitation of a male gaze. Héloïse is depicted in this photograph as being gentle and having a plump body, which appeals to men. This is a common phenomenon when females can also use the male gaze to judge other women because of the huge influence of the male gaze. Héloïse, though, expresses her irritation with the portrait. She resisted both arranged marriage and the male gaze by refusing to pose for prior male artists and criticizing Marianne's portrait. She stands in for all women who are constrained and scrutinized by patriarchal culture. She opposes the objectification of the male gaze in any case. She declares that there is no life in this image when she views Marianne's finished work with the hidden male gaze to express her rage over the feature. When Marianne is content with her careful gaze at Héloïse, Héloïse says to her that "We are in the same place." "If you look at me, who do I look at?" which makes Marianne aware that they are in an equal place, not the subjective painter and objective model [6]. This is the point where it realizes the transformation from the male gaze to the female gaze. On the one hand, Marianne quits the hidden male gaze she used in a painting and adopts the female gaze. On the other hand, after falling in love with Marianne, Héloïse is free of the male attention she has been experiencing.

## 4.2 Gaze as equal seeing

The concept of the gaze was developed by Michel Foucault to illustrate the dynamics of socio-political power relations and the social dynamics of society's disciplinary mechanisms. According to Foucault, a gaze is an asymmetrical act of looking [7]. Moreover, Chinese feminist cultural critic Jinhua Dai also points out that the existence of the camera forms a kind of unequal power relationship between the photographer and the object, and sometimes even constitutes a violent sexual assault on the object" (42) [8]. The male gaze reflects the power disparity between men and women. As a result of the patriarchal structure, men are frequently in a dominant position. The female gaze, on the other hand, is a gaze devoid of subjects and objects, resulting in equal seeing. In the film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, viewers may mistake Marianne for the subject as a painter and Héloïse for the object as a model. However, this is not a film that caters to that type of male gaze when the painting is a typical scene of gazing at traditional thoughts. If the film focuses solely on Marianne's gaze and imagination of Héloïse, ignoring Héloïse's subjective status, it falls into another type of male gaze trap [9].

The female gaze is an equal seeing, and equality is the core of the female gaze and the film. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* expresses the concept of equality in three ways: equality between men and women, equality between lovers, and class equality. To begin, the film uses the female gaze to argue for gender equality. According to Mulvey's theory that there are three different looks associated with cinema: "that of the camera as it records the prolific event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion" [2]. Without a male director and male characters, this film is a female gaze film from a female's perspective. Male can also be seen by females in the shot of Marianne on the boat at sea. Marianne has a point-of-view shot while watching those men row the boat. The film fully demonstrates women's independence and advocates for women to have the same social status as men by using this type of female gaze. Second, it demonstrates the equality of romantic relationships. The gaze between Marianne and Héloïse is mutual and shared. Instead of many sole shots of Héloïse, Marianne and Héloïse usually appear together in medium shots. Héloïse and Marianne share equal parts in these symmetrical shots, implying equality in their relationship. They share their spirits and hearts when they share the communal room in film shots. Héloïse and Marianne truly understand and "see" each other. Third, the film emphasizes the concept of class equality. In one scene, Héloïse is cutting potatoes, and Marianne is pouring wine while maid Sophie is embroidering. In this shot, they share the same parts. Sophie, despite being a maid, is equal to Héloïse and Marianne. They also enjoy playing like friends. Also, Héloïse and Marianne's love is in opposition to class inequality, as Héloïse is an aristocrat while Marianne is an artisan-class girl. The female gaze is an excellent way to demonstrate equality by proposing equal power dynamics on-screen and breaking the conventional male gaze, thereby trying to improve equality in all aspects.

## 4.3 Gaze that focuses on characters' feelings and experiences

Marianne and Héloïse truly "see" each other and fall in love as a result of their equal seeing. Unlike the male gaze, most female gaze focuses on the character's inner thoughts and feelings. The story of *Orpheus and Eurydice* is a great example of showing the fates and feelings of the three women from different perspectives. Sophie thinks the ending of the story is terrible and believes Orpheus should not turn around. Marianne argues that Orpheus chooses the memory of Eurydice, making the poet's choice rather than the lover's choice. Héloïse believes Eurydice is the one who asks Orpheus to turn around. The three distinct interpretations reveal their ideas. Sophie is forced to undergo a painful abortion because of the man's betrayal. Influenced by this, she takes Eurydice's side and criticizes Orpheus' actions. Marianne and Héloïse's understandings foresee their fate in the end. Héloïse is the one who asks Marianne to turn around, demonstrating her attitude towards their love. They are aware of the impossibility and the tragedy of their love. As a result, they chose to leave memory between them, which is the poet's choice. Sciamma devoted a lot to filmmaking. Apart from the beautiful dress of the actresses and the oil painting-like setting that corresponds to that time, she also paid attention to other details like the music in the film. There is almost no music in the film. Sciamma said in the

interview that the movie also talks about the impact of art on people's lives. Héloïse wants to listen to music and read books, but they are not easily available to her. If directors want to make the audience feel what the characters are experiencing, they cannot give them music [10]. She gives audiences a chance to experience like Héloïse at that time when music is not easily available to her. The female gaze allows audiences to interact with characters and feel what they are feeling. The female gaze provides viewers with a new perspective on the world, one that is more touching, sensitive, and seeks subtlety.

The female gaze, as opposed to the male gaze, treats women and some other characters as persons rather than depicting them casually. In the female gaze, female characters can avoid being gazed at by the male gaze. Furthermore, the theme of the female gaze is equality, and it promotes equal power dynamics on screen, whereas viewers will notice some inequalities between men and women, classes in male gaze films. The female gaze allows viewers to understand characters' emotions through their complexion and dialogues easily. The female gaze is not superior to the male gaze, and they are equally expressive in film. However, the female gaze is a good way to promote gender equality and feminism. The female gaze not only allows women to avoid being viewed as erotic objects in men's eyes, but it also allows audiences to experience what characters do. The female gaze can be used not only by female directors but also by male directors. It is more of a mode of thought than a gender perspective. Because of patriarchal society's enormous influence, female directors may fall into the trap of the male gaze sometimes. While the female gaze is more easily found in female works, it can also be obtained by learning and attempting to eliminate the male and pseudo-female gaze. Few films use the female gaze excellently, like *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* nowadays. However, people have the awareness that they should break something old and stereotypical, trying to create something new, which helps promote feminism. The female gaze is not only a way to promote feminism but also a different way and angle to understand the world. For example, when the male gaze is filled with heroism and beauty, the female gaze pays more attention to the relationship between people and reveres nature rather than conquering them. The female gaze appears or tells stories modestly and inclusively instead of being radical and violent. With the development of a diversity of gender, the gaze will not be limited to the dual female gaze and the male gaze. Spectators will experience more angles and perspectives from diverse cultures. However, the female gaze is a great way at this time to change the majority's minds which are full of the male gaze that did some invisible harm to women. For instance, women's appearance and clothing are prone to be discussed and judged by not only men but also women. Society is very hard on women's appearance. They are required to be perfect and beautiful even if they are already close to perfect. However, they are not only suffering from body shaming but also will be criticized for wearing over-exposed clothes, which are equal to sluts in people's eyes. Consequently, the female gaze offers a thinking mode that no one should be judged by others. Women have the freedom to dress and chase the beauty in their eyes. Therefore, the female gaze is a way to break the conventional male gaze and should be welcomed Sciamma said in an interview: "It is not because you are a woman that you do that, but it is a decision, a thought process. Since the male gaze exists since cinema does, the female gaze, even though we cannot really put together all films that do that, is at least a vigilant, conscious, and playful attempt to break free from that convention. So, I think it is something to be welcomed" [10].

## 5. Conclusion

The study introduces theories of gaze, especially Mulvey's idea of the male gaze, as well as the traits of the pseudo-female gaze in movies, such as a simple gender switch, extensive explicit lesbian sexual depictions, and superficial and stereotypical narration of female images. The study then concludes with some traits of the female gaze, using the *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* as an illustration. According to the study, the female gaze involves a shift in mindset rather than just a simple exchange of gender. Characters can be aware of other people's gaze, which is a form of objectification that is typically male gaze, and object to it when it occurs. The female gaze promotes equal power dynamics

on screen and focuses on the emotions and experiences of characters, sharing these emotions and experiences with viewers. The female gaze is a smart strategy to break the traditional male gaze and promotes gender equality. The term "female gaze" is not yet defined, but the study offers some clues that can help filmmakers get rid of the pseudo-female gaze and get closer to the genuine female gaze. The media can influence people's ideologies and eventually aids in the realization of gender equality. Gender diversity increases as society progresses. For some audiences, the male gaze and female gaze based on gender dualism may not be appropriate. More and more gazes can be established to break the conventional male gaze, including the female gaze, offering more angles and mindsets to audiences. The definition of the female gaze will be explored in the future and then applied to more films to help realize gender equality.

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