

How does the male gaze construct our understanding of sexual power — using the example of Chinese film female characters

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Abstract. China's increasing development and the people's growing reliance on online social networking have led to social phenomena on social media becoming more prominent and, to some extent, deepening. Nowhere is this more evident than in the phenomenon of misogyny and men-pleasing, a gender debate that has been ongoing unresolved for over a century. The subject of this research paper is an in-depth analysis of the male gaze and a critique of the solutions that have been proposed. The research perspective of this paper will be based on the dissection of the male gaze by Foucault and Laura Mulvey, as well as postmodern feminist perspectives, to present and judge the gender issues that exist and are potential. From a theoretical perspective, the male gaze inherently influences plot and characterization in film, and the latter functionally deepens the impression on the masses on a societal scale. On the other hand, from an ideological standpoint, it can be argued that current attempts to counteract and diminish the male gaze are overly one-sided and may actually deepen society's ambivalence towards this social issue.

1. Introduction

Under the vast backdrop of the internet jargon "MeiNan" (direct translation: Men-pleasing) spreading virally in the Chinese internet space, it indirectly proves that the concept of the male gaze has been socially accepted in China. It is being utilized for commercial benefits and serves globally as a determinant of male power [1]. However, as a term in sociology, it has existed for over a century, making it worthwhile to explore the logic behind its global reinforcement and its role in the broader discussions around feminism in China, especially in the film industry.

To start with, the term "MeiNan" refers to the phenomenon of female posters creating content with a high priority to please males. Most of these females often link this term to girl power, which serves as a concrete example of countering the male gaze phenomenon in practice [1]. If the act of observing "MeiNan" content is criticized, it is essential to clarify the distinction between male gazing and physically drawing the male's attention to the opposite sex, the female. The reason is that the male gaze specifically refers to the act of looking at

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women from a male point of view that objectifies them as merely sexual objects [2]. Laura Mulvey, in her 1989 work "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," analyzed how the male gaze, which she sees as a psychological phenomenon, dominated the Hollywood industry at the time of her research and reinforced the process by which males construct images of women from their own viewpoint. Particularly in films, it was found that women were objectified to be passively observed beings, while men controlled the storyline and the stage, both on and off-screen. However, nearly half a century after the publication of Mulvey's work, in the new media age of China, which has a strong dependency on the internet, the phenomenon of the male gaze persists, constantly being evaluated and penetrating every aspect of the social media industry, as showcased in the web phrases "MeiNan" and "YanNu" (misogyny), and within this premise, the film industry is relevantly criticized [3].

The thesis statement of this paper is that the male gaze persists in Chinese film culture, but efforts to eliminate its consequences are premature and distorted; it is simply a retargeting of gender focus from female to male to please the audiences of the latter sex. This paper is organized into four sections, each serving its own function to fulfill the goal of depicting the comprehensive image of the male gaze and how Chinese film producers are currently working both for and against this phenomenon. Firstly, sociological and film theories relevant to this discussion will be introduced and analyzed to uncover the formation and influence of the male gaze in films. For example, the rearranged power structure in visual culture by Michel Foucault and its connection with feminist theory should serve as a gateway to discuss the history of the male gaze, leading to a discussion around specific film close-up scenes and narrative approaches by directors. Secondly, a detailed analysis of modern Chinese films such as "Let the Bullets Fly" and "Creation of The Gods I: Kingdom of Storms" will be conducted, focusing on specific female characters, in an effort to conclude a theme of the industry's attitude towards gazing. The order follows the release times of the films, which makes the transition in gender solutions more apparent. Lastly, counterarguments will be provided to evaluate the themes that emerge and challenge the concept from different aspects, including anti-gaze, the very existence of the male gaze, and extreme feminism.

2. Theoretical Framework

In Foucault's work "Discipline and Punishment," he examines the transition in the control of subjects from physical to psychological/spiritual. This is showcased in the change in the public's view on punishment, facilitated by social movements in the 18th century that aimed to remove extreme physical punishment and transition into an era of surveillance control to make subjects obey [4]. This transition illuminates the discussion on how power has evolved through time and what it can inform us about feminism. In Foucault's view, this shift was significant for understanding the concept of power and how authority maintains it. A concrete example is the shift from physical punishment of prisoners to intimidate the public by kings, to complete behavioral control strategies implemented in public institutions such as asylums, armies, and hospitals. This study of power informs readers about how power operates in society today, and more specifically around the topic of feminism and even more closely at the concept of the male gaze. Understanding this system of power is crucial for grasping how postmodern feminist concepts of decentralization and decoupling operate, with the knowledge of such power structures in mind.

Firstly, the concept of discipline and a disciplinary society informs the formation of modern society, where disciplines control the bodies, behaviors, and roles of women. This is not only closely linked to but rather an elevated version of the male gaze, as it specifies the methods with which surveillance is enforced effectively upon society. It also concretizes the process through which women are destined to be oppressed by this system of power [4]. Linking back to the web vocabulary of "MeiNan," this was deemed to be an exaggerated

critique of female content that targets men by the vast internet public of China. Under such a theoretical background, the act of criticizing these contents should be to counter-strike the entire surveillance and controlling power system that society operates under, a system in which only elite men have a say. Secondly, on the macro matters of Biopolitics and gender control, Foucault raised the point on Biopolitics that the ruling machine of countries determines to control and manipulate the biological features of the population. To accomplish this goal, women are controlled under birth-control policies and medical measures, along with the dispersed nature of power by their authority. The monitoring and limitations are imposed on its female population.

Such a theoretical lens offered by Michel Foucault can be combined to explain the oppressive environment constructed around the female sex and how it maintains its authority. However, the enforcement is also achieved through the means of media, and for this angle, the film study theories raised by Laura Mulvey could aid the discussion. In her 1975 work, she pointed out the three key elements that contribute to the theme of the male gaze in Hollywood films in the 20th century, which should aid in analyzing the Chinese film male gaze as a toolbox because of its wide compatibility in film studies. Under the vast theme of objectifying women in traditional film shooting, these three angles are offered to evaluate the existence of the male gaze in modern cinematic settings. The three gazes being the gazes of the camera, characters, and audiences. Firstly, to analyze films, it is advised to evaluate the focal angles from which the camera focuses on the female characters' body parts and whether there exists a deeper meaning to entail, or if it is merely to sexually celebrate the subject's appearance. Secondly, she highlighted that the male gaze can be blended into the narratives of storytelling, and more specifically, such psychological morbidity, as coined by Mulvey, could be adopted by the male characters in their narratives. Lastly, it was mentioned that the way in which audiences participate in gazing is through the encouragement of adopting a male position of vision, which in turn leads the factors of Scopophilia and Narcissism to kick in. This then leads to the enforcement and strengthening of the male gaze. These two notions were first coined by Freud in his work "Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex," but later adopted by Mulvey to analyze sex in film works, with the former referring to the male's sexual pleasure of having the female displayed to them and the latter referring to the approval for the male visions displayed in the film, from which to immerse oneself into the story and complete the seizure of power and control over women [5].

3. Analysis

In the context of the Chinese film industry, there are toxic stereotypical features of the male gaze that persist, but studies by both Chinese and Western researchers have found that there are efforts to eliminate this nuisance. In their 2023 article "Stereotypes of Female Characters in Film and Television in the Context of the Male Gaze and Their Breakthroughs," Ruqi Wang and Zhishan Zhu analyzed this specific problem and categorized Chinese cinema into three categories: subsidiary, scapegoat and material [6]. From this analytical perspective, this paper will combine the theoretical foundations of Foucault and Mulvey to provide comprehensive feedback on how the Chinese film industry interacts with the male gaze. In Chinese, the word "gaze" is defined as "to look without slanting the eyes" [6], and this is shown in Jiang Wen's films in close-ups and narrative shots, while in "Let the Bullets Fly", a film based on history and depicting females as the scapegoats of male power, the perspective of the male gaze is disguised by the director on the grounds of narrative, but from the perspective of the narrative and the camera angle, it is not difficult to see the traces of the objectification of women in the film. Traces of objectification of women are not difficult to be found.

Firstly, in terms of narrative background, "Let the Bullets Fly" is set in the historical period when the Bei Yang government was in power, in which women's social roles were limited to that of a reproductive tool and an object of sexual exploitation [7]. In that era, such value controlled women, and the unconsciousness of gender inequality threatened women and served to monitor them in the service of men, which perfectly fits Foucauldian postmodern feminism's description of the oppressive atmosphere constructed around women in society. Jiang Wen's motives for pandering to the real, franchised values of the time in a simulated historical context are thought-provoking, and Jiang Wen's own defense of the film's plot as a "critical portrayal" lacks support. This historical context of oppression facilitates the viewer's ability to see and relate to the film from the perspective of the leading men of the same historical period and, of course, the female characters in the film. This off-screen psychological dynamic is not part of the film's plot or specific depictions, but it creates an atmosphere of objectification and eroticization of women, and in conjunction with Foucault's description of the power structure, this environment leads to a failure of the critical perspective constructed by Jiang Wen, and the narcissistically created masturbatory reflections on the female characters in the film by his male audience.

Back to the film itself, from the construction of female characters, "Let the Bullets Fly" also shows a setting that caters to the needs of male audiences. The female perspective in the film mainly revolves around two characters, one is Sister Hua, and the other is the governor's wife (played by Carina Lau), both of them share a common identity label, that is, prostitute, and their difference is that the governor's wife stands for mature and sexy, while Sister Hua stands for sacred and pure. This dichotomy of roles has been seen in Jiang Wen's previous works, specifically in the way it serves the functionality of the film and conveys its gender implications. As far as the outcome of the film is concerned, Sister Flora eschews the pleasures of the flesh and so gains the favor of the hero, while the governor's wife falls victim to being shot to death [8], and this kind of feminist thesis of destiny runs through the storyline of "Let the Bullets Fly", making women's status and destiny unimportant, but only as an accessory in the struggle of the male characters. While this perspective is presented as an aid to the advancement of the story line in the film, outside of the film, this heavily masculine perspective leads to the popularization of the male gaze and the ensuing social acceptance, which inevitably further enhances male gender power and the disapproval of women's social diversity [9]. In the film, this depiction of women's bleak destiny, lust, and limitations is clear, as evidenced by when the protagonist, Zhang Mazi, played by Jiang Wen, pursues the governor's wife by touching the latter's breasts with a pistol and promising, "Sleep in the same bed, but don't have sex." [8], but in the end, the governor's wife sees Pocky Zhang's social status, seduces him and subsequently has sex with him, but ends up being accidentally killed in Pocky Zhang's assassination attempt on the governor, which also represents the end of his scapegoat. On the other hand, Sister Hua, as a woman who also comes from a prostitute background, is feisty and straightforward, and engages in class struggle and helps the male character's revolutionary cause, eventually marrying one of Pocky Zhang's henchmen and living a long and happy life. This contrast also exists in the language of the camera, specifically in the close-ups of the governor's wife, which focus on her ample breasts, hips, the bed when she is having sex, and the absence of camera shots when she is conversing with the other characters, whereas the close-ups of Sister Flora, who is neatly dressed and chaste all the time, and who is conversing with the other characters in progressively closer close-ups, also conveys to the audience at all times the relative significance of her role to the storyline when compared to others.

The women in Jiang Wen's films fit the stereotypical image of female characters in most modern Chinese cinema. Compared to the rich variety of male characters, female characters portrayed in Chinese films are often functional, symbolic images, and often bounded by the destiny of becoming the scapegoat, manipulated and materialized to be the subsidiary of the

male's course. The tragic endings of those sexy women are leading the audience to agree that relationships based on carnal desires are unreliable, thus negating the diversity of the female image. Following the repetitive display of sexy flesh, the film's narrative possibilities are filled in, fragmenting the already incoherent storyline. But more importantly, this subconscious social identity leads to an orientation that reinforces male gender power and constructs a social environment that oppresses women in modern China, as cinema enables this notion to be recognized and promoted.

4. Evaluation

To evaluate, with the development and change of the times, postmodern feminism has gradually emerged, and people have begun to advocate for the establishment and realization of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes, and this idea has, not surprisingly, infiltrated the film, television and media. Interestingly, as if in retaliation for the once clear-cut status of men and women in society, and in a desperate attempt to prove and realize the unity of the two, a convenient counterpart, the "female gaze", has emerged in Chinese society today. Since the "male gaze" is the objectification of the male to the female, many people subconsciously believe that the "female gaze" is a reversal of the "male gaze", and this term is particularly used in some film and television works, such as letting the film camera capture the male body lines, taking advantage of the fetishistic psychology of film viewing to guide female viewers to gaze at the desire of the male body.

Take the Chinese film "Creation of The Gods I: Kingdom of Storms" as an example, it is an ancient fantasy drama revolving around the political struggles and myths at the end of the Shang Dynasty [10], in which there are both male gaze and female gaze, which means that we need to explore the nature of the formation of the gaze through the film in order to differentiate and explain these two social phenomena [3]. First of all, the biggest selling point of the film is the "Proton Corps", which is an army of half-naked men. Normally, the male body is violent for women [11]. However, through the desirability of the violent male body by both the female characters and the female audience, the female fear of the violent male body is dissolved, thus removing the potential threat of violence felt by the female audience. Overall, the use of a limited and specific female gaze allows for the recoding of gendered violent events and the violent male body itself. On the other hand, another selling point of the film that serves the male gaze is the heroine, Su Daji, who is portrayed in the plot as a beautiful, sentimental and ill-fated fox demon, and who has sparked heated debates about her "alluring charm" and "metaphorical sexuality in dance" [3]. The collision of these two gazes does not flesh out the film, but rather makes it more of an erotic film in a historical context, and this slide show of flesh actually brings about a loss of patience on the part of the audience. In the female gaze, the male protagonist is objectified and becomes a sex object for the female viewer [12]. Moreover, it is precisely these two kinds of sexism, which are identical in meaning, that are put into the same film, exacerbating the film's commerciality rather than its artistry, by partly serving the majority of the audiences, rather than admiring the film from an artistic point of view, the pleasing perspective is adopted.

In her book *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey (1975) uses Lacanian theory to unpack the visual objectification of women, arguing that the idolization of female characters in film and television leads to decontextualization anxiety in men [2]. Thus, the power dynamics behind the 'gaze' are actually at the heart of such forums when it comes to discussions around the 'gaze'. Because of patriarchy and heteronormative hegemony, people talk about the 'male gaze', and because of the need to resist this pathological domination, people mechanically engage in the reverse gaze, the 'female gaze', which is a reversal of gendered exploitation and represents the female gaze in its perverse prevalent and socially commercialized form of feminism. This inverted gender exploitation represents the

prevalence of perverse feminism and the social exploitation of the commercial value of women, while the actual gender power imbalance is not completely resolved, and in fact the social mood continues to serve the commercial success of the film rather than the redistribution of gender power.

5. Conclusion

Stepping outside the realm of cinema, the fact is that this kind of thinking has permeated all walks of life in society. In his analysis of power, Michel Foucault introduced the concept of the 'disciplinary gaze,' in which society demands unconditional compliance with rules through standardization or normalization. In this context, culture and discourse have a powerful effect on individual behavior in terms of self-discipline and self-taming. Thus, postmodern feminism builds on Foucault's view of power by further suggesting that the world uses the discourse of men, and men become the discourse of the world. When the discursive, symbolic products are made in patriarchal societies, the public inevitably re-enters the realm of male domination, and once again, into the realm of discursive domination. The social context in which the male gaze exists at all times is focused on the fact that the topic of gender dichotomy is constantly being brought up, and that awakened women, who lack empathy for the still oppressed minority of their group, are a phenomenon that can exacerbate the social phenomenon of devaluing the female community. This seemingly sharp criticism, which may seem like pandering to men, actually deepens the gender antagonism, rather than working towards actual affirmative action. Often, in reality, this social subconsciousness is exploited to create secondary victimization of these oppressed women, which manifests itself in the exploitation of their commercial value. Going forward, it is crucial to promote a more nuanced and equitable representation of gender in Chinese cinema that prioritizes the deconstruction of harmful stereotypes and power dynamics. Only through this can the complete images of sexes be represented and the desired equilibrium of equality be achieved.

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