

# The Question of “Female Gaze”: Will it Ever Be Possible to Have One?

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## Abstract

This paper problematizes the issue of an “active female gaze” as opposed to the passive one determined by the dominant ideological system that produces an “active male gaze” in narratives of cinema and advertisements. In mainstream cinema as well as the advertisement industry, usually the story is rendered from an essentially male perspective, regardless of the narrator’s being male or female. It is so even when the subject matter is related to issues that directly concern women like the repression of their desires or Lesbianism, for instance. Using some of the key ideas propounded by British film critic Laura Mulvey, the paper examines some of the texts from both cinema and the advertisement industry to find out the complex mechanism of the “male gaze.” It also attempts to explore the possibility of a “female gaze” that might, if achieved, give new dimensions to both forms of entertainment.

Images in multifaceted forms are presently dominating the world of culture, politics, and economy. The advertising industry is at its best now, and cinema has become the most powerful and influential form of entertainment. In the current world, products like cinema and advertisements are considered texts, and it is possible to deal with them in the same way as a literary or theoretical work. Therefore, point of view and perspective have become some of the preoccupations that are frequently addressed in any critical discussion of cinema or advertisement. In these two mediums of entertainment, different techniques are applied for rendering particular perspectives, among which one of the most important is the angle of the camera. It is the narrator’s vehicle to say and show what s/he wants. Here the

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question of gaze, more specifically the difference between the male and female gaze, comes in. It has been observed that most of the time in both forms of entertainment, the gaze through which the narrative is presented, is basically male. Even in cases where the story is sympathetic towards a woman or simply has a direct feminist angle, the gaze cannot be proclaimed as “female” since it resorts to the conventions and techniques used by the male gaze. However, the very idea of gaze is directly connected to the concept of representation itself, something which is dependent on the norms and conventions of the culture of a particular society. Therefore, the question of the possibility of a “female gaze” becomes a complicated one.

The seminal essay of the British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” will clarify some of the concepts related to the paper. According to Mulvey, cinema, through its powerful manipulation of images, creates several scopes for pleasure. Referring to Freud’s *Three Essays on Sexuality*, she mentions two important concepts: scopophilia and voyeurism. Scopophilia, for Freud, is a drive that exists outside the erotogenic zone; it is the pleasure of looking at things secretly. In its extreme form, scopophilia can turn into voyeurism which is strongly connected to the erotic impulses. It becomes a perversion that makes the viewer an “obsessive voyeur,” whose sexual gratification comes from secretly watching the activities of others. The viewer is the subject who objectifies the person s/he is watching and derives pleasure from it. Mulvey relates these ideas to cinema, pointing out an interesting fact about its mechanism. For her, cinema creates an atmosphere that reinforces the voyeuristic fantasies of its viewers. She quite cuttingly comments that the mainstream cinema presents a “hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and plays on their voyeuristic fantasy” (Mulvey 835-836).

The physical setting of a movie theatre clarifies the point. The dark room of the theater where the viewer sits facing the bright screen makes him/her feel as if s/he is the only person watching the cinema. Besides, the theater gives the impression that the world it presents to us is completely separate from the one in which the viewer belongs. What we see on the screen has an air of total alienation about it where the characters seem to be the people who are utterly unaware of the world outside the movie theater, which is ironic since the medium of cinema is very conscious of its audience. Therefore, the viewer gets a feeling that s/he is secretly watching the private activities of the characters shown in the film. The viewer becomes the voyeur, an act which is facilitated by the environment of the movie theater as well as by the controlling “male gaze” of the narrative.

Now, the question of the “male gaze” and its mechanisms should be brought to focus. Mulvey points out that in the patriarchal society the forms of entertainments, like everything else, are determined by the male. Therefore, the pleasure of looking has been split between “active/ male and passive/female” (Mulvey 837). What the viewer

sees is rendered through the eyes of the male: he controls the gaze, and by becoming the subject, objectifies the female in turn. Therefore, the female is shown the way the male gaze wants her to be shown; her body becomes the ground where the fantasies of the male are projected. As Mulvey comments, "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously to be 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*" (837).

In mainstream cinema, for example, popular Hollywood or Bollywood movies, the female characters, especially the female protagonist, often enter the screen in a visually striking way with the camera focusing on some particular parts of her body. We can begin with a classic movie, *Raging Bull* (Scorsese, 1980), where the first appearance of the female protagonist Vickie (played by Cathy Moriarty), in many ways, makes us understand the issue of male gaze. She is seen sitting beside a pool wearing a white swimming costume while the protagonist Jake Lamotta (played by Robert De Niro) notices her and keeps looking at her. We can realize soon enough that using close shots, Moriarty's body is being glamorized through the gaze of the film's protagonist, a gaze that is immediately shared by the male viewers, even though the movie is done in black and white. Color would have added another dimension to the whole process, but even without it, the point becomes clear. However, the best example would be the "Bond Girls" in the popular James Bond franchise where the female protagonist always, as a part of the tradition of the films, makes her entry wearing bikinis. *Die Another Day* (Tamahori, 2002) is another case in point where the entry of its female protagonist Giacinta 'Jinx' Johnson (played by Halle Berry) is to be noted. When she makes her appearance, her body is foregrounded by the camera for the male gaze, and the male viewer who quickly identifies himself with the hero, objectifies her body. It is noteworthy that in movies like these, the role of the female characters are extremely limited as far as the storyline is concerned, but when it comes to the exhibitionist aspect of the film, she becomes the prime focus. There are numerous other examples to support this particular point of the overwhelming male gaze in popular cinema. Hollywood blockbusters like *True Lies* (Cameron, 1994), *The Fast and the Furious* (Cohen, 2001) or *The Transformers* (Bay, 2007) can delineate this point further. In these movies:

such scenes are marked by a pointed focus on sexually attractive female body parts, to say the least; and the focus demands that the camera repeatedly capture and display those scenes. It turns out that the pointed focus of the camera is targeted specifically at the male gaze. In other words, erotic scenes in Hollywood film can be said to have been designed in such a way that would gratify only the male gaze." (Munim, 2012)

The case has been quite the same in mainstream Indian movies as well. When Bollywood, the second largest film industry of the world, applies strategies that are

culture specific, the strong presence of a male gaze is felt too. One should refer to the massive sweep of the so-called “item songs” that are recently being seen in these films. These songs are visually extravagant, where both the lyrics and choreography are strongly sensuous. The main female performer is scantily dressed, and the camera becomes an instrument in subjecting her body evidently to the male gaze. We can refer to movies like *Dabaang* (Kashyap, 2010), *Tees Mar Khan* (Khan, 2010), *Dum* (Nivas, 2003) which are probably famous more for their item songs than for the content or characterization. These songs do not have much connection to the main plot, but are made to look essential by providing glamour and glitz at the cost of objectifying the female body.

In the advertisement industry as well, the same male gaze is evident. Advertisements that we see on billboards or on the screen extensively use images of the human body, and, in most cases, the female body. Ads of beauty soaps, body lotions, fairness creams, and so on could be some of the best instances. For example, if we notice the very familiar and widely known narrative of beauty soaps like Lux, we can see the voyeuristic elements at work. Lux is an international brand and celebrities from Sophia Loren and Brigitte Bardot to Bollywood actresses like Madhuri Dixit and Katrina Kaif made their appearances to promote the brand. In one of the ads, we see Katrina Kaif in the bathtub, soaping herself. Her appearance is, to use Mulvey’s term, highly “coded,” and she attracts the attention of the viewer with a kind of sensuality that is attached to the actresses of mainstream cinema. Here, too, the viewer becomes the voyeur who secretly watches the actress engaged in a private activity like bathing. This same narrative is also present in the advertisements of other brands; for example, Indian actress Kareena Kapoor’s appearance in the Indian brand Vivel, or our very own Joya Ahsan’s role in an advertisement of the Bangladeshi brand Sandalina. In both cases we see what we have seen in the advertisements of Lux, but in two different ways. Interestingly, in the case of the Vivel ad (Sarker, 2011), Kareena Kapoor’s character shows an awareness of the viewer since she returns a seductive smile at the camera. Here, the desire to look and to be looked at are mingled, and a kind of justification is created for voyeurism on the part of the male gaze which is even more dangerous and further complicates the issue.

At this point of the debate, we can bring the issue of the possibility of a female gaze. Mulvey’s essay shows how the conventional cinema narrative always prioritizes the “active” male gaze where the “passive” female is subjected to that gaze. Her examples are taken basically from mainstream cinema and she asserts that, in avant-garde cinema, it would be possible to create an opposing approach. Therefore, we might assume that avant-garde cinema, or the new forms of advertisements, might offer a potential scope for an “active” female gaze. However, this is not as simple as it appears at first sight. Here, a particular aspect of the idea of representation would shed some light. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues that representation can never be described as objective or as something that presents a

universal reality, rather every work of representation has to do with its particular context, that is, the society, politics, economy, and culture as a whole in which that particular text is produced (cited in Hawthorn, 2000). Therefore, what is presented and how it is presented are determined by the "unspoken" rules of representation in that particular society. For example, a scene of sexual violence or any other form of violence will be presented in different ways by directors of different countries or continents. The conventions of representation in cinema or advertisement vary from country to country and the degree of body exposure, therefore, also varies according to those conventions. When a film from Iran portrays a private scene, it becomes completely different from the one we see in a film from France or Italy. In Iran, a woman is always seen wearing a scarf even when she is in her bedroom with her husband, which is a result of certain restrictions on representing particular scenes in the country. This is not the case with cinema from Europe, for example. The viewers of these countries might feel uncomfortable seeing a woman wearing a scarf in front of her husband, but calmly accept a private scene portrayed in a more raw or graphic way. Having said this, however, it should also be mentioned that the exposure of the body, which in many ways depends on the traditions of representation, does not fully justify the explicit eroticization of the female body. Besides, many films or advertisements that are apparently conscious of the sexual imbalance in representation and seek to offer a different approach both in style and content, often suffer from the problem of a confused gaze. Therefore, these films, while dealing with a subject matter that has obvious feminist overtones, or shows a more liberal outlook, are often seen to be presented from a conventional "male gaze." This is a complicated statement and some examples would clarify the point.

I would begin with the critically acclaimed Italian cinema *Malena* (Tornatore, 2000). The movie is set in Italy during the 2nd World War and tells the story of a woman, Malena, who is left alone in a society of men who make her the object of their desire and do not hesitate to inflict extreme violence on her when she is completely vulnerable. She is only desired, not loved. The only person that loves her is the 12-year-old protagonist and the narrator of the movie, Renato, who at the end becomes the only person to help her to find her husband. The movie clearly criticizes the hypocrisy of the patriarchal society, where even the women function as accomplices of the male power. The climactic scene of the movie delineates this particular point when the women of the town, who blame Malena for their husbands' unfaithfulness, beat her violently and the men observe the victimization from a distance, attempting no intervention to save her. However, while the film should be highly commended for its powerful subject matter, some aspects of its representation must be questioned. The character of Malena, played by Monica Bellucci, is shown as a victim of her society. But parallel to this runs the story of Renato who becomes completely obsessed with her and constantly fantasizes about her. Consequently, the boy becomes "a man." Here, the character of Renato, even though the only sympathetic person to Malena, represents the "male gaze" by projecting his sexual

fantasies on Malena's body. He literally turns into a voyeur when he finds a hole in her house where she lives alone, and peeps into the hole to secretly watch her private activities including bathing and lovemaking with a man who brings her food in return. The movie uses close up shots and focuses every now and then on several parts of Bellucci's body, especially the genitalia. Here the foregrounding of the female body is done in two ways. On one hand, the background score, a particular use of color on screen, and lights accompanied by a stylized representation of Bellucci's body attempt to romanticize the character of Malena. On the other hand, there are more raw presentations as well, especially in Renato's extreme fantasizing of Malena that are often extended to his long erotic dreams. In both cases, the objectification of the body and the presence of a controlling male gaze are evident, whereas Malena is shown as a passive female, a victim who barely talks. Even though she is the central character, she cannot control the way she is seen. It cannot be said that here a "female gaze" is irrelevant or unnecessary since the subject matter it deals with could effortlessly create space for that particular gaze in which case the movie would have had a broader dimension.

Here we could also add the Bengali film *Chokher Bali* (Ghosh, 2003), adapted from a novel of the same name by Rabindranath Tagore. The film portrays the intense sexual desire that a female, more specifically a widow, is forced to suppress in a patriarchal social structure. The movie, however, digresses in many ways from the novel, both in terms of story line as well as representation. One could argue that the difference of medium and the context of the two cultural texts required that the representation be different. However, while Tagore's novel brings out the repressed energy from within with the masterful use of language, Ghosh resorts mainly to the camera and this is where it becomes problematic. Here too, like *Malena*, the focus of the camera is on the body of the female, or rather on the females. Both close and long shots are used to foreground parts of the body of the female characters, though Binodini, the young widow and protagonist, played by Aishwarya Rai, is given more space as far as exposure is concerned. As mentioned earlier, Tagore's text dwells on the psychological aspect of the repressed desire, which Ghosh brings in as well. But the constant focus of the camera on the female body shifts the attention more to the physical and, in the process, the strong presence of the "male gaze" is again felt. Binodini, the woman who desires, soon becomes another object of desire when her body is made the constant focus through the use of the camera.

Interestingly, the presence of a similar kind of "male gaze" can be traced in movies that deal with the issue of lesbianism. Movies such as *Fire* (Mehta, 1996) or *Blue is the Warmest Color* (Kechiche, 2013) deal with powerful issues of sexual deprivation, identity, and the force of liberated desire. However, while presenting subject matters like these, these films cannot go beyond the representations we usually encounter. *Fire*, directed by Deepa Mehta, portrays the lives of two women, Radha (played by Shabana Azmi) and Sita (played by Nandita Das), and how they suffer sexually in a society where the act of lovemaking is determined by its men, in the

case of the two women, by their husbands. Radha's husband, Ashok, due to his subservience to a certain Swamiji, has taken a vow of celibacy, and since Radha cannot bear children, sees it only fit to stay away from her. On the other hand, Sita's husband Jatin completely ignores her because he has a girlfriend from Hong Kong whom his family could not accept. Both women, eager for love and affection, slowly realize the futility of the conventions society has imposed on them, rules that decide the "duties" of the wives and the necessity of performing them rigorously, but never question whether the husbands are performing theirs as well. Therefore, when these two women engage in a homosexual relationship and finally decide to live a life together on their own, the director actually shows a powerful protest against those discriminating conventions. However, in spite of dealing with a subject matter that goes against the enduring traditions of the sub-continent, the representation of body seems problematic here. The lovemaking scene which is followed by Ashok's horrified discovery of the affair could be an appropriate example. The scene is dealt with in a detailed way where Sita's body is exposed considerably. It might be argued that since the movie itself is about breaking traditions, one should be liberal enough to accept this exposure as well. But this might not be so simple. The focus on Sita's body makes her an object to be looked at, a problem which is further complicated when Ashok later re-imagines the whole scene by way of a flashback. Therefore, one does not have to go further to realize that the male gaze is at work here, recreating the incident in his mind.

On the other hand, *Blue is the Warmest Color* (Kechiche, 2013) is more about an individual than his/her society. The protagonist Adele (played by Adele Exarchopoulos) finds out what she truly desires as far her sexuality is concerned. Although the society and its conventions are always present (in the forms of her nagging friends who find out about her visit to a gay bar or her parents who have certain fixed ideas about living), they remain in the background. The issue of lesbianism is given a philosophic dimension when Emma, Adele's partner, quotes Sartre's famous lines from *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, where he asserts that "existence precedes essence" and we are born to exist and define ourselves by our actions. For Emma (played by Lea Seydoux), Sartre's idea made her free and she could afford to be what she is right now, a woman who chose her own sexual identity, not accepting what was imposed on her by a society that is run by a heterosexual discourse. In Emma, Adele finds what she wants or where her desires truly lie. Therefore, the particular intimate scenes between Emma and Adele could be regarded as the physical manifestation of intense mechanisms of desire. As a result, it might seem that the film has achieved something in the form of an "active female gaze." But it is not as simple as it might appear at first. While the intimate scenes might have the possibility of being rendered through a female gaze, it also has a danger of another kind. When these scenes become too explicit, there arises the question of sexual gratification. The film, quite unintentionally, can become a medium for satisfying the desires of a male viewer and, in turn, can create the "male

gaze” as well. Here, the difference between the two gazes might become confused, and what apparently seems like an active “female gaze” can, in reality, be quite the opposite.

We have been talking about the focus of the camera on the female body throughout the whole paper but the question of male body exposure may also arise. This deserves serious critical consideration, not only to be inclusive in approach, but to demonstrate the complications related to the very idea of gaze. In mainstream cinema or advertisement, focus on foregrounding the male body in a sensuous way is also prevalent. The popular Hollywood action movies like *Conan the Destroyer* (Fleischer, 1984), *Conan the Barbarian* (Nispel, 2011), or Bollywood actor Salman Khan’s recent blockbusters like *Wanted* (Deba, 2009), *Dabaang* (Kashyap, 2010) can be suitable instances where the camera focuses specifically on the muscles and other body parts of the protagonist. So, what is the determining gaze here? Male or female? At first it might seem that a kind of female gaze is present here, but we do not have to think hard to realize that this foregrounding only reinforces a male chauvinistic attitude where the male body is used to represent the power that is attached to it. Therefore, here the gaze cannot be “active female” since what is shown and the way it is shown are manifestations of the conventional dominant force which offers no new perspective.

What about the possibility of an “active female gaze” then? Is it only an idea or can it really be achieved? We know that the conventions of representations influence the way the body is seen, and the gaze is largely dependent on them as well. However, this must not mean that cinema is constrained within the limited boundary of those conventions and resultant perspectives. We have seen that in most of the mainstream and many art house cinemas the “female gaze” is absent. But we cannot say that it can never be possible to have one. The movies that discriminate while presenting the body, and thus end up exposing only the “female body,” are more conservative, a problem that is shared by the mainstream cinema in most countries. But in this respect, Bollywood and Hollywood seem to be even bigger conformists than others. For example, countries like South Korea, France, Sweden, Denmark, or even the United Kingdom have shown considerable liberality in terms of the equality in exposing the body. We can refer to movies like *Fur* (Shainberg, 2006), *Shame* (McQueen, 2011), or *Nymphomaniac* (Trier, 2013), where the male body is fully exposed along with the female. This might make one suppose that the exposure of a male body is the only way to provide some kind of a solution to the “female gaze.” This is an over-simplified statement for a rather complicated issue. What is more important here is the equality in the representation of the sexes. If a society suffers from serious gender imbalance of power, something which has to do with a particular kind of discourse, it is quite natural that the imbalance will also be accentuated in its different forms of representations. Therefore, in order to create the space for the “active female gaze,” directors and writers of movies or advertisements need to question the prevalent representational forms and the

controlling “male gaze” that works according to those forms and subvert them to create a new kind of cinema or advertisement. Movies like *Fire*, *Malena*, or *Blue is the Warmest Color* had all the resources to do that, but they failed to use them and fell victim, quite unintentionally though, to the conventions that required serious observation as well as subversion.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the problem of gaze is not exclusive to the medium of cinema or advertisement; it is equally relevant to literature, music, and other forms of representations as well. However, in recent times, the reason this concept is frequently referred to in the discussion of those two particular forms is the very idea of “the image.” Literature creates images with the use of words, but cinema does so with the camera and this image has motion and a kind of immediacy that words do not have. The concept of gaze becomes problematic in cinema since it often claims what it shows and how it shows to be real which, in most of the cases, prove to be otherwise. A sensitive as well as conscious viewer of cinema and advertisement must understand the politics of gaze and react to it accordingly. Cinema is now one of the most powerful forms of entertainment and also one of the most influential. As a result, what we see on screen matters on levels the directors and writers are not always aware of. Therefore, there should be space for an active “female gaze” which would broaden the vista and create new possibilities for cinema by including subject matters that need to be addressed and that have long been ignored by mainstream media.

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