

Male gaze in the cinema. How women in general, and mothers in particular, are represented in the movies of the '70s

Matei LUCACI-GRÜNBERG

University of Theatre and Film "I.L. Caragiale", Bucharest

m.lucaci.grunberg@gmail.com

Abstract

In this theoretical context offered by Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory, the article analyzes how the male gaze theory applies to the movies of the 70s in general, with a special emphasis on the Romanian movies of that period. Women's representation in the movies directed by Mircea Veroiu, Dan Pița, Alexandru Tatos, Mircea Daneliuc, Stere Gulea will be discussed from the perspective of the construction of femininity, with a special emphasis of motherhood models.

Keywords: *cinema, visual culture, Laura Mulvey, male gaze theory, motherhood.*

Introduction

The notion of the gaze can be related back to Simone's understanding of women's oppression within the dialectics of gender relations (Beauvoir, 2009). Women, the oppressed ("second") sex, internalize the objectifying gaze of men upon them and do not have the power to own or return the gaze.

Today, the notion of the gaze is widely used in visual culture. Berger (1972) proposed that in Western culture, from painting to advertising, men look and women are looked at. The theoretical explanation of the male gaze as involving complex mechanisms of voyeurism and narcissism was specifically developed in film studies. Film theorists argue that the medium of film is based on scopophilia: in the darkness of the cinema, the viewer is a voyeur who can look at the screen without limits or fear of being punished for his or her desire.



Laura Mulvey advanced the idea that active and passive aspects of the desiring look are distributed among the sexes in cinema. The male character is powerful as he actively commands the narrative and the visual point of view. In classical Hollywood films the male character looks at a woman while the camera films what he sees. Because the camera films along with the male character, the viewer is invited, or rather forced, to adopt a Male position. “The male gaze „is a cinematic structure combining a threefold look: camera, male character, and viewer. To enhance the visual pleasure, the woman’s body is “cut up” into close-ups through framing and editing. The male gaze works in cinema as a form of voyeurism objectifying the woman’s body and turning it in to a passive spectacle; in Mulvey’s famous words, into “to-be-looked-at-ness.” In cinema, the identification with the larger-than-life figures on the white screen revitalizes the early mirror phase for the spectator. The powerful and attractive heroes in the film function as ideal mirror images for the viewer, who can narcissistically identify with them.

In this theoretical context, the article will analyze how the male gaze theory applies to the movies of the 70s in general, with a special emphasis on the Romanian movies of that period. Women’ representation in the movies will be discussed from the perspective of the construction of femininity, with a special emphasis of motherhood models.

Male gaze as an important concept in film theory

Looking at various types of visual productions (movies, public advertisements) through gender lens has been important for observing the ways gender is created and recreated over time and space. An important theoretical perspective used to observe the construction of gender is offered by the gaze concept. The gaze pertains beyond gender relations being widely used in visual culture research. Berger (1972) proposed that in Western culture, from painting to advertising, men look and women are looked at. The concept also deals with panopticism in society. A panoptic gaze is a form of disciplinary power involving techniques of control and regulation. Michel Foucault (1979) argues that modern societies have installed technologies of surveillance to discipline their subjects. Contemporary forms of surveillance and the ubiquity of media in the public realm, produce an anonymous and authoritative panoptic gaze.

Feminists have argued that the disciplining effect of the panoptic gaze is internalized by women in their relation to their own body. For feminist the male gaze is at the core of identifying ways and means of objectification and subordination of women through artistic creations. The

theoretical explanation of the male gaze as involving complex mechanisms of voyeurism and narcissism was specifically developed in film studies. Film theorists argue that the medium of film is based on scopophilia: in the darkness of the cinema, the viewer is a voyeur who can look at the screen without limits or fear of being punished for his or her desire

The notion of the gaze can be related back to Simone understanding of women's oppression within the dialectics of gender relations (Beauvoir, 2009). Women, the oppressed ("second") sex, internalize the objectifying gaze of men upon them and do not have the power to own or return the gaze.

Laura Mulvey advanced the idea that active and passive aspects of the desiring look are distributed among the sexes in cinema. The male character is powerful as he actively commands the narrative and the visual point of view. In classical Hollywood films the male character looks at a woman while the camera films what he sees. Because the camera films along with the male character, the viewer is invited, or rather forced, to adopt a male position. "The male gaze „is a cinematic structure combining a threefold look: camera, male character, and viewer. To enhance the visual pleasure, the woman's body is "cut up" into close-ups through framing and editing. The male gaze works in cinema as a form of voyeurism objectifying the woman's body and turning it in to a passive spectacle; in Mulvey's famous words, into "to-be-looked-at-ness."

Consequently Laura Mulvey argues that in cinema, women are typically portrayed in a passive role that provides visual pleasure through scopophilia, and identification with the on-screen male actor⁸ She asserts: "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*," and as a result contends that in film a woman is the "bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning." Mulvey takes the psychoanalytic theory of Lacan as key to understanding how film creates such a space for female sexual objectification and exploitation through the combination of the patriarchal order of society, and 'looking' in itself as a pleasurable act of scopophilia, as "the cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking."

Mulvey identifies three "looks" or perspectives that occur in film which, she argues, serve to sexually objectify women. The first is the perspective of the male character and how he perceives the female character. The second is the perspective of the spectator as they see the female character on screen. The third "look" joins the first two looks together: it is the male audience member's

perspective of the male character in the film. This third perspective allows the male audience to take the female character as his own personal sex object because he can relate himself, through looking, to the male character in the film.

Putting the male gaze concept into historical perspective one needs to pinpoint that the arguments within Mulvey's theory are influenced by the time period in which she was writing her famous book "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". It is the period of the second wave feminism, which was concerned with achieving equality for women in the workplace, and with exploring the psychological implications of sexual stereotypes. In this context Mulvey calls for an eradication of female sexual objectivity, aligning herself with second-wave feminism.

In cinema, the powerful and attractive heroes in the film function as ideal mirror images for the viewer, who can narcissistically identify with them. Narcissism, the desiring look at oneself, is related to Lacan's theory of the mirror phase. The film functions as a mirror in which the viewer recognizes his or her ideal "I" through a secondary identification with the hero, in addition to the primary identification with the cinematic apparatus of camera and projection. The mirror phase is a psychoanalytic concept that explains how a child builds his or her first sense of a conscious self, at a young age before the entry into language. Lacan proposes that the parent holds the child up before a mirror, teaching the child to recognize itself by distinguishing its self from the (m)other. The mirror image is an imaginary idealization, because the child projects an ideal image of itself onto the mirror. This ideal self-image leads the child to a first awareness of the ego. The recognition of the self in the mirror image is simultaneously a "mis"-recognition, because the child identifies with the image of itself as another, that is to say, as a better self than he or she will hope to be in the future. In cinema, the identification with the larger-than-life figures on the white screen revitalizes the early mirror phase for the spectator. The powerful and attractive heroes in the film function as ideal mirror images for the viewer, who can narcissistically identify with them.

For feminist film theorists, the usage of male gaze creates an unbalanced relation between the active male hero and the passive woman. As the structures of voyeurism (the desire to have the other) and narcissism (the desire to be the other) are both geared toward the pleasures of a male audience, the female viewer has no other option but to identify with a male gaze or adopt a marginal or masochistic viewing position. Consequently, feminist activists – ranging from theorists to filmmakers – have tried to create a female gaze and develop visual pleasures for a female audience.

Questions of a black women's gaze and a lesbian gaze were soon included in this quest. The notion of the gaze as a device in power relations between the "races" was further developed in black studies.

Many other feminists have pointed to what Mulvey named as the male gaze that predominates at least in classical Hollywood filmmaking. Movie director Budd Boetticher summarizes the view:

"What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself, the woman has not the slightest importance."
 (p.9).

As a reaction to this objectification and sexualization of women in visual culture a movement to depict women more realistically in movies started. Nevertheless, acknowledging the value in inserting positive representations of women in film, some critics asserted that real change would only come about from reconsidering the role of film in society, often from a semiotic point of view.

Mulvey's theory has been inspirational for further developments and critics. Starting with her arguments about the complex relationship between spectator and film text which unveils a viewing apparatus whereby the male gaze, equipped with political, economic, social and sexual power, consigns women to silence, marginality and absence, there are feminists that are challenging the essentialist binarism of Mulvey's claims. For example, coming from a black feminist perspective, American scholar, Bell Hooks, put forth the notion of the "*oppositional gaze*," encouraging black women not to accept stereotypical representations in film, but rather actively critique them. The "*oppositional gaze*" is a response to Mulvey's *visual pleasure* and states that just as women do not identify with female characters that are not "real," women of color should respond similarly to the one denominational caricatures of black women. On the other hand, Miriam Hansen, in "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship" (1984) put forth the idea that women are also able to view male characters as erotic objects of desire. Tania Modleski argues that Hitchcock's film, *Rear Window*, is an example of the power of male gazer and the position of the female as a prisoner of the "master's dollhouse". Carol Clover, in her popular and influential book, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton University Press, 1992), argues that young male viewers of the Horror Genre (young males being the primary

demographic) are quite prepared to identify with the female-in-jeopardy, a key component of the horror narrative, and to identify on an unexpectedly profound level. Laura Mulvey, in response to these and other criticisms, revisited the topic in "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by *Duel in the Sun*" (1981). In addressing the heterosexual female spectator, she revised her stance to argue that women can take two possible roles in relation to film: a masochistic identification with the female object of desire that is ultimately self-defeating, or a transgender identification with men as the active viewers of the text. A new version of the gaze was offered in the early 1990s by Bracha Ettinger, who proposed the notion of the "matrixial gaze".

The theory in itself, the concept of male gaze as proposed by Laura Mulvey and as further refined by other feminists offer a gender sensitive frame for analyzing movies, for identifying the dynamics of gender stereotypes used, the gendered power relations offered over time. The next chapters will provide examples of how male gaze works and define femininity and masculinity within various well known international and Romanian movies of the 70s.

Male gaze in the cinema of the '70s

Like almost any decade, the 70's have been prolific for the film industry. From Francis Ford Coppola to Marin Scorsese, from Woody Allen to Milos Forman, from Stanley Kubrick to Bernardo Bertolucci, from John Cassavetes to Werner Herzog and so on. The film industry was still dominated by men and so many of the portrayals of women came from a man's point of view. I would like to start with *A woman under the influence*, a film made by John Cassavetes in 1974, starring Peter Falk and Gena Rowlands. In many ways, this is maybe one of the most complex and powerful woman character in the 70s. The plot revolves around a Los Angeles housewife and mother who is on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Her husband convinces her to go to an institution to undergo a treatment, because she has become a threat to herself and to others. Meanwhile the father takes on the role of the mother – which seems to be even more complicated. He doesn't cope anywhere better than her. The story then tries to reconcile the mother and the father, the parents and the children, the family and the society and so on. In essence, it is a story about dysfunction, and dysfunction is extremely painful to watch. The film was made by Cassavetes and his close group of friends, including his wife Gena. The fact that it was independent – made in easier to be sincere and intimate in the approach. Mabel (the character played by Gena Rowlands) is portrayed in a very special way. She has problems, and her problems are not

minimized by the author. She is a complex human being who is stuck in a very dangerous emotional place. In my opinion, Mabel is one of the most ample and deep depictions of women in cinema. The author loves her, but doesn't always understand her, follows her, gives her time, analyses her – all to find peace and love, and to make sense out of life.

A totally different approach to women can be seen in *Last Tango in Paris* – a film directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, starring the aging legend Marlon Brando and the young, up and coming Maria Schneider who was only 19 at the time of the shooting. Brando plays a middle-aged American mourning the suicide of his wife. Schneider plays a young engaged Parisian woman. The two meet and start a strange, bizarre and anonymous sexual relationship. In *Last tango in Paris*, the woman is an object of desire, but not necessarily in a superficial way. The story is about mourning and love. The two need the game they are playing – they don't know anything about each other, but they need each other. After sexually abusing her, he disappears for a while. After that they meet again and this time, he comes clean – he tells her his life story. She doesn't want to find out anything – and after a tango and a chase, she tells him her name and then mortally shoots him, while rehearsing her text – she tells herself that she was raped by a stranger and that is why she killed him. Again, this film portrays the woman in a very complex way. Actually, it portrays relationships and needs, sexual or non-sexual in a very complex way. Here, Jeanne (the character played by Schneider) is an element of desire, of sexual desire, of lust, of youth. One interesting fact regarding the shooting of this movie is the famous rape scene, in which Paul anally rapes Jeanne using butter as a lubricant. Maria Schneider claims that she did not know that that scene existed – and that it was a surprise, an unwanted surprise. Her perspective is that she felt humiliated and a little raped during the shooting of the scene. In fairness, she was 19 years old up and coming actress who was filming with Marlon Brando and Bernardo Bertolucci. I think it was very hard to say no – especially in that period of time. She never spoke to Bernardo Bertolucci again. Bernardo's perspective is different – he claims that the scene was in the original script and that just the butter was improvised on the day of the shooting. He claimed that he felt guilty for the impact it had on Schneider but didn't regret it. The question I raise is: can we actually judge what happened? Did two mature household names take advantage of a young actress? Did they cross the line? Is she a real victim? Again – it's very important to acknowledge the time period – things happened differently in that time period. For me, the fact that a woman comes out of a movie with regrets and humiliations and mental problems is a real issue. Art should not encourage that

type of behavior in any way. I get the fact that that scene has become iconic, but the price she had to pay I think is unfair. But again, it's extremely hard to judge, to know the truth – I think we should strive to be good human beings first and foremost and we shouldn't put people into potentially damaging situations.

Of course, more in-depth analysis is needed to make any documented judgments about the gender dimension of the film industry of the 70s. Just following this quick tour among famous women roles in the movies of the 70's I would say that they were full of truth, but also full of stereotypes, including gender stereotypes. Most authors were men, and men were interested in war, love, death, lust, revenge and so on. Most of the deep and complex characters were male – which can be understandable, because men made them – and they talked about themselves, about their view on the world. Women are mainly distributed in secondary roles or if they have important parts in the movies, they are mainly important for their looks, sensuality being depicted as sexual attraction, or docile, domestic wives and mothers. Nevertheless, there are exceptions such as Robert Altman, who used to develop strong and profound female characters in films like *Nashville* or *3 women*.

Beyond the male gaze in the Romanian cinema of the '70s

Because of the communist regime, the Romanian cinematography had a different destiny in comparison to the western cultures. In the 70s Romania produced a lot of propagandistic historical movies – which were profoundly nationalistic and evolved around strong male characters that loved their country and fought for freedom or against fascist regime– films like: *Mihai Viteazul*, *Vlad Ţepeş*. Anti-fascist movies like: *Actorul si salbaticii* or *Atunci i-am condamnat pe toti la moarte*. These types of films usually had female characters – but they were secondary in importance and included in the script just for their looks, for offering the possibility of some romance on the background of the main heroic stories. Women in these films stood by their men, served their needs, and decorated the scenes with their beauty.

Another genre film which was popular back in the 70s was comedy. Romania had for example a famous series called *BD (Brigada diverse)* which made fun of police work and thieves. In these movies women were portrayed similar to comedies in the west. They were frequently beautiful, cheap, hunting man for their money, sometimes stupid and most of the time sidekicks or secondary characters.

Majority of the stories in the movies of the 70s are developed around men characters. Women are invisible, marginalized, presented in their domestic roles (wives, mothers), dependent on men, appreciated for their looks not so much for their brains.

Nevertheless, there are some (few) counter examples to such gender stereotyped movies, with women absent or in secondary roles, mostly passive. A good example is *Premiera* – a movie by Mihai Constantinescu, a comedy about a woman theatre director, wonderfully played by Carmen Stănescu. In this film, the lead is a strong female and all the men are stupid and incapable. A sort of reversed gender stereotype is applied. Another example comes from the artistic creation of Alexandru Tatos. At least two of his films in the 70s have a strong female lead – *Rătăcirea* and *Duios Anastasia trecea*. Both films have a strong political dimension reflecting the fascist and the communist regimes. Anastasia is a young teacher (played by Anda Onessa) that fights strongly and courageously for a Christian burial of a partisan man. She is a heroine in a world filled with coward men. She is beautiful but not only beautiful. She has strong values, opinions and she fights for them no matter what. She has beauty inside not only outside. In "Rătăcirea", the main character is also a woman that marries a German man and leaves Romania for a better life. She is not happy abroad, her husband abandons her and she deeply regrets her homeland and wants to return to Romania. Although the script favors a stereotype model of femininity—a woman that opportunistically uses her looks and sexuality to obtain benefits in life, the character as she evolves in the script is more subtle, offering a rich spectrum of manifestation of her femininity.

Of course, Elisabeta Bostan, among the few women directors of the 70s (another name could be Malvina Urșianu) is a good example for exploring the feminine universe within her artistic creation. Movies such as *Veronica*, *Veronica se întoarce*, *Mama*, *Saltimbancii* are famous musicals produced in Romania during communism that have women at the core of their stories. Motherhood and maternal values are highly represented within these artistic productions. These endearing movies promoted a traditional model of femininity, based on maternal instincts of women, focusing on their empathy, devotion towards children and family. Elisabeta Bostan could be considered important in the moviemaking of Romania due to the fact that she gave maternity and motherhood big (traditional) narratives. Beyond her merits one should notice the paradox: in a period of strong pronatalist policies, when thousands of women died due to illegal abortions, women were depicted in movies like the ones mentioned above as happy mothers, fulfilled women.

This is how propaganda works in different areas- it produces a distorted ideologized view about the society.

More in depth study is needed, but it is obvious that in the Romanian movies of the 70s, women are either absent in main roles, or much more marginalized (secondary roles) being mainly present in traditional gender roles. The male gaze is present everywhere and the majority of these movies would not pass the simple Bechdel test (asking basically whether a work features at least two women who talk to each other about something other than a man) or more sophisticated ones like Mako Mori test. In general, plenty of movies produced in the communist period illustrate some of the most common stereotypes about femininity. Such a stereotype way of approaching femininity has continued for decades. The characters in the vast majority of films made until 2000 portrayed womanhood either as “The Beauty/Virgin/ Saint” archetype, as “The Mother”, as “The Whore”.

Conclusion

Cinema has been for a long time considered as an entertainment built mainly for the male desire. Founders of cinema, majority men, created for a long period of time products based on their own vision about the world, their own esthetic needs and desires. Women have been for a long time just objects viewed and viewable by the implicitly male spectators. Femininity was represented from a male perspective, dependent of the male source of signification not only in cinema.

As Pop observes we may talk about an androcentric perspective in the Romanian cinema too.

“The “old cinema” was dominated by phallogentrism. Most of the movies in the Romanian cinema, until the appearance of the new generation of young directors (1989-2000), even more so in the case of the productions made during the Communist regime (1948-1989), were either directed by men, or had men as main protagonists. This meant that there was a pervasive symbolic representation of men as fathers, or authority figures, or simple heroic characters, all of them placed in powerful and representative situations, while women were second rank characters.” (Pop, 2011, p1)

Nevertheless, any kind of gender sensitive analysis should be carefully contextualized. Starting with the 20th century, influenced by the waves of feminisms, women’s representation in movies changed. There are now many examples of cinema productions with powerful female roles.

Women are no more just accessories for sexual pleasure of men, are no more depicted mainly in their roles of mothers and wives. Women and men are now approached in their multidimensionality (sex/gender and many other social categories such as age, class, race, education, sexual orientation, etc.).

Today cinema is in general much more inclusive, treating” others”-women, black people, gay people with less biases (or with updated stereotypes). Politically correctness (positively understood as respect for differences) makes all those involved in the production of movies paying due attention to the diversity among people. I consider that the male perspective on life and arts should intertwine much more with the women perspective on life and arts. Life, cinema, and art in general have changed a lot since the 70s. Diversity of voices can be heard more easily now. We are not exactly where we should be – but I think the direction is right.

References

- Adam, Ileana, Simona Mitroiu, Lincoln Geraghty (Reviewing Editor), Remembering the past: Representations of women’s trauma in post-1989 Romanian cinema, *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 3:1. 2016
- Brădeanu, Adina; Dragomir, Otilia; Rovența Frumușani; Daniela, Surugiu, Romina, *Femei, cuvinte și imagini. Perspective feministe*, Iași: Polirom.2002
- Hipkins, Danielle, Kate Taylor-Jones (Editors), Prostitution and Sex Work in Global Cinema New Takes on Fallen Women, *Global Cinema* (eBook), 2014.
- Beauvoir, Simone de., *The Second Sex*. London: Cape. 2009.
- Berger, John, *Ways of Seeing*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 1972.
- Clover, Carol, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, NY: Princeton University Press. 1992.
- Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Friedan, Betty, 1963. *The Feminine Mystique*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1963.

- Geraghty, Christine, *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre and the 'New Look'*, London: Routledge, 2000.
- Mayne, Judith, *The Woman at the Keyhole. Feminism and Women's Cinema*, Indiana University Press Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1990.
- Mulvey, Laura, "Afterthoughts on 'visual pleasure and narrative cinema' inspired by 'Duel in the Sun' (king vidor, 1946)". *Framework: the Journal of Cinema and Media*, (15/17), 12-15. 1981, Retrieved October 20, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44111815>
- Mulvey, Laura, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 14–26. London: Macmillan, 1989.
- Pop, Doru, "Feminism, Feminine Discourse and the Representation of Women in the New Romanian Cinema", *Ekphrasis*, 1/2011 Femininity, Feminism And Female Identity In isual Representations, p.12-37, 2011.
- Smelik, Anneke, "Feminist Film Theory." In *The Cinema Book*, edited by Pam Cook, 491–504. London: British Film Institute, 2007.
- Smith, L. Stacy; Choueiti, Marc, *Gender Disparity On Screen and Behind the Camera in Family Films*; The Executive Report (available online, Retrieved September 19, 2020)
- Petrescu, Mihaela,"New Romanian Cinema, women's self-empowerment, and hegemonic masculinity: Female figures in Cristian Mungiu's Occident" (2002) and Radu Muntean's Boogie (2008), *Studies in European Cinema*, 17:1, 51-65, 2020.
- Ursa, Mihaela, "Toxic Mothers, Devoured Children - An Overview of the Maternal Imaginary in Romanian Cinema" (in Romanian). *Revista Transilvania*, (2), 76–82, 2018.
- <http://www.missrepresentation.org>, Retrieved March 15, 2020.
- <http://www.cinemagia.ro/filme/nasa-561173/>, Retrieved June 20, 2020
- <http://www.cinemagia.ro>, Retrieved March 18, 2020
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bechdel_test, Retrieved April 15, 2020.