

Literature Review and Research Essay

ADMA6000: Independent Project

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The Media Theory of the Gendered Gaze

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Introduction

The gaze is a media theory that is repeatedly referenced and discussed within a myriad of film and media critiques and reviews. Specifically, the gaze sees frequent usage within feminist film theory spaces - especially in regards to examining not only the ways in which women are presented on the screen, but also the ways in which audiences living with the patriarchy engage with said women on the screen. In order to understand this concept of the gaze, it is imperative to conduct rigorous research into the pre-existing literature that exists on the topic to create a literature review that condenses many of the ongoing discussions of the gaze. For this literature review, we will focus on two sections - first, the background research of psychoanalytic film theory and the unconscious, in order to have a solid baseline understanding of the advanced psychological discussions within the gaze, and then upon the gaze.

Psychoanalytical Film Theory

Psychoanalytic film theory exists in order to examine and analyse the ways in which we create and then view characters, narratives and concepts within film through the lens of psychoanalysis and the thinkings of Freud, Lacan and many more. In Damian Cox and Michael Levine's *Psychoanalysis and Film* (2018), the authors investigate the interaction between the teachings of psychoanalysis and how it impacts the ways in which we see film and film production. Cox and Levine argue that we can apply psychoanalysis to film in order to see how we use film as an act of escapism, indulging in our repressed desires and fulfilling them through the act of going to the cinema and watching film. When we watch films, this internalised sense of self-criticism that we hold throughout our daily lives goes away, and instead we can enjoy seek pleasure and fulfilment. In this sense, Cox and Levine state that when we are watching film, we are engaging and feeding our 'orectic' self - our self that is driven by solely desire. The films we engage with exists to satisfy our orectic needs, and by understanding this inherent sense of wish fulfilment that we carry with us when we seek our art and film, we can better understand not only the act of spectatorship - the act of looking over film - but we can better understand and interpret the film itself by understand

the creators' fellow orectic needs and desires. Cox and Levine present a well-researched understanding of the ideas of psychoanalytic film theory, however, many of their high-level terminology, such as the 'orectic', goes completely undefined or is not explained in enough detail for those uneducated in psychology.

The Unconscious

Alongside these ideas presented within the discussions of Cox and Levine, an important aspect of psychoanalysis and also psychoanalytic film theory is this notion of the unconscious. The unconscious is what we are not fully aware of - it drives our behaviours and actions in ways that we may struggle to fully understand. In John A. Bargh's *Our Unconscious Mind* (2014), Bargh aims to explore and understand this idea of the unconscious. Firstly, Bargh enlightens us to where these notions of unconscious originate - in the works of Freud and the idea of the ego. Freud argued that while the conscious was the rational, the unconscious was the irrational - to which Bargh explains that modern psychology, though not disputing these principles, argues that both the conscious and unconscious are necessary for us to adapt to our developing world and survive the challenges we face. Moreover, Bargh explains that the unconscious can be seen to be our automatic thought - it is our first response to something, fast and instantaneous, a thought that does not benefit from planning and examining. On the other hand, our conscious thoughts are much more controlled, purposeful and altogether much slower. These systems within our mind compliment and contrast with each other to allow us to continue to make the necessary decisions we must make everyday. The unconscious is riddled in all our decisions, from the moment we encounter something that requires thought, such as seeing a stranger for the first time. In understanding this unconscious self, we can begin the process of regulating our emotions and implicit biases, such as the stereotypes and biases that we have been conditioned by society to feel about certain individuals.

Nonetheless, Bargh's notion of the unconscious is only directed towards our thoughts and does not discuss the hypothesis that even our feelings can be unconscious to a certain degree. This is what Piotr Winkelman and Kent C. Berridge seek to identify and defend in their essay *Unconscious Emotions* (2004). In their essay, Winkelman and Berridge explain in robust detail to the reader a series of experiments that they conducted in order to investigate their hypothesis - that even our emotions can be unconscious. Firstly, Winkelman and Berridge make clear the arguments that stand in their way. Traditionally, whilst the ideas of unconscious thought have gone undisputed in many psychology fields, our emotions have always been assumed to be conscious.

Despite this traditional view, Winkleman and Berridge began a series of experiments that were based on the idea of creating unconscious emotions through subliminal messaging. Eventually, through a series of rigorous testing and experiments, Winkleman and Berridge created within their participants what they deemed to be unconscious emotions. This was completed by conducting separate studies involving asking participants if they were thirsty, then presenting them with subliminal emotions on a perceived neutral expression - happy, sad or angry. The first study was asked to state their emotions and then pour a drink and the second was given a drink to rate the supposed price of, then evaluated their emotions. Despite neither group seeming to be emotionally affected by the subliminal messaging, their behaviour with the drinks was. Those who were shown happy faces poured more in the first study, and were more willing to pay higher prices in the second, proving that to a certain degree, even our emotions could be unconscious, as reflected within our behaviours.

The Gaze

Now, with this understanding of the background research required to understand notions associated with the gaze, we can begin to conduct reviews on the literature surrounding the gaze. Many would agree that one of the most important pieces of literature on the gaze is Laura Mulvey's *Visual pleasure and Narrative cinema* (2013). First published in 1985, in this essay Mulvey introduces us to her concept of the gaze and more specifically of the male gaze. Mulvey then presents to us this notion of scopophilia, the sense of pleasure from the act of looking, and how cinema exists to satisfy this unconscious need to look. This calls back to the notion of the orectic self, as discussed in the Psychoanalytical Film Theory section. Specifically, due to the ways in which patriarchy and misogyny shape the ways in which we both create and respond to art in any kind, the male viewer is given a space within which he can satisfy his scopophilic desire to watch women on the screen. This gaze seeking to fulfil its desire stems, according to Mulvey, from our inherent need to look into the private world of others. The cinema allows viewers to not just feel as though we are just watching a crafted story, but are looking into a private world from the pleasure of our dimly-lit seats. We are free to observe without judgement and explore our desires through film. Moreover, Mulvey then explains that this pleasure from looking is allowed framed with the active male and the passive female. Overall, Mulvey argues that women are put on the screen to be looked at with pleasure and provide for the male gaze.

Nevertheless, Mulvey's work presents an understanding of the gaze that lacks the modern implications of the 21st century patriarchy, such as the development of modern technologies allowing for easier access to the private world. One such work that does, however, is Kelly Oliver's *The male gaze is more relevant, and more dangerous, than ever* (2017). Oliver

primarily bases her understanding of the gaze and more specifically the male gaze upon Mulvey's, building upon this struggle of female audiences to find a feminine identity as a viewer in the patriarchal confines of the male gaze within the context of the modern world. Oliver argues that growing technologies allow for the possession and commodification of female bodies that was once privatised to the dark world of the cinema to become much more rampant. Now, with the internet, one does not simply own the female body through the gaze within the cinema, but can actually own the image itself, with the endless access to images of women that can be manipulated in whatever way the viewer sees fit. Moreover, Oliver argues that despite the strides that have been made in modern society and the feminist movement, the impact of the male gaze is still extremely prevalent. Social media allows for the continued development of the male gaze as, like cinema, it exists to satisfy our voyeuristic sense of desire by allowing us to endlessly observe the private worlds of others. Furthermore, growing technologies allow for a new wave of the male gaze, through the inventions of scopophilic actions like the 'creepshot'. Now, the average woman on the street is unexpectedly thrust into the violence of the male gaze for simply existing.

In conclusion, through the literature review we can clearly see that the gaze is a topic well founded in pre-existing notions of psychoanalysis and the unconscious, with several areas of discussion that are still relevant to this day. However, there is clearly room for discussions surrounding the gendered gaze that are not only centred on the male gaze, but on the new idea of the female gaze - a gaze wherein the main spectator is instead the active female who tells stories from her perspective. As a result of this, it is necessary to research both the male and female gaze in depth, and to see them in a case study - for this we will discuss *Gone Girl*.

How can we analyse the representation of characters through the lens of the gendered gaze?

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Gender is a universally acknowledged societal construct that one simply cannot navigate through the many trials and tribulations of life without feeling its heavy weight lingering upon them. Who we are, how we operate within the gender spectrum and how we are perceived as gendered beings, subjected to countless stereotypes and centuries of relentless stigma, affects how we react and how we are viewed in a multitude of different settings - including film. The gaze is a manifest of how gender operates within the film medium - its impact can be seen in almost every aspect of filmmaking and film watching, from directing, cinematography, editing to viewing as audiences. It shapes how we present characters and how we then read them - often in wildly contrasting perspectives. For this essay, we will discuss how this concept of the gendered gaze, as outlined in many discussions of psychoanalytic and feminist film theories, impacts the ways in which both male and female characters are constructed and presented to the audiences. We will examine the concept of the gaze thoroughly by looking at both the female and male gaze. Furthermore, we will engage a clear example of how the gaze impacts an audience's response with a case study. For this essay we will be discussing *Gone Girl* (Fincher, 2014), through both the lens of the female gaze and the male gaze, and how these contrasting gazes presented our two main leads and their roles in narrative in radically different manners. By the end of this essay, one should be able to confidently understand the concept of the gendered gaze, how this gaze operates and why certain audiences behave so differently because of it.

Firstly, we must outline what exactly this concept of the gendered gaze is. The gaze is a prominent theory that can be seen in various different discussions surrounding psychoanalysis (Cox and Levine, 2018) and the unconscious (Bargh, 2014). Through the lens of film, the gaze is an experience that film audiences have when they visit the cinema

and watch over the carefully crafted experience presented by the filmmakers, wherein the gaze gives the spectator a unique sense of freedom and control over the film, giving them a unique experience of pleasure (McGowan, 2003). Discussions of the gaze often centre around how the characters that are presented to us on the screen are shaped in terms of their unique, socialised identities, and how, as a result, the myriad of different spectators within the cinema space are impacted by said represented, whether through feeling a strong sense of pleasurable objectification and respect as a man expressing the male gaze, or instead feeling a persistent and often uncomfortable sense of objectification (White, 2017) as a woman experiencing the male gaze.

Desire is an important aspect of this notion of the gaze, especially when one dives deeper in discussions of the gender gaze and the impacts of our patriarchal society. The gaze is inherently political - many would argue that most film related discussions of the gaze and its impact on the film world and its spectatorship cannot ignore the inherent power dynamics at play. Due to the ways in which our society functions and behaviours, and the ways in which the implicit biases (Bargh, 2014) that shape the attitude towards gender functions in the modern world, the gaze still continues to be dominated by the male desire to see and therefore control women and their bodies on screen through their uniquely male gaze (Mulvey, 2013).

So, what exactly is this notion of the male gaze? Many would argue that the centre-point of the discussion of the male gaze should naturally focus upon the works of Laura Mulvey, for she first began to outline this notion of the male gaze back in 1985, and helped to spearhead to realisation of this power dynamic between men and women both as character upon the screen and as spectators within the audience. Women are constructed within the patriarchy by them appearing to 'miss' the key qualities of maleness - they represent what makes the idea of the ideal men in the content of what they lack. To quote Mulvey directly - "she can only exist in relation to castration and cannot transcend" (2013). Castration is a key theory within the notion of psychoanalysis and the male gaze - it references to this concept that when men recognise the physical differences between them and the women in their life, often when young boys recognise the physical differences between them and their mothers and they feel a strong sense of anxiety and confusion over the fear of losing what they deem to their manhood (Zakin, 2011).

As a result of this, women are then pushed into the role of the oppressed, of the passive, while men are pushed into the role of the oppressor, the active. Then, with this privilege of oppression, men are given the unique opportunity to hold this previously discussed sense of freedom and control over the image on screen and gain this unique film experience of pleasure. Mulvey notes this experience of pleasure to be a violent and voyeuristic one, one

where in a woman's only purpose it is to not contribute to the narrative, but to provide men with pleasure by looking at them. "Cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into a spectacle itself" (Mulvey, 2013) - the role of women in film is to provide for the male gaze.

However, many would argue that in the modern age, this view upon the gaze and this centering entirely upon the male gaze is not reflective of the developing world, and the modern world pushes to not only put women on the screen in more active roles, but to put women in the audience with a unique feminine role of spectatorship. At the end of Mulvey's infamous essay *Visual pleasure and Narrative cinema*, Mulvey lays out just exactly what needs to be done to allow for women to be present within the gaze. She states that there needs to be a move away from the traditional film-matics where women exist as objects to be looked at and to deny the sense of pleasure that the male gaze gains from watching, allowing women to be free from the terror of the male gaze (Mulvey, 2013). With this passionate declaration of war against the male gaze, many feminist theories began the development of the notion of the female gaze. It could be argued that the female gaze is a difficult notion to truly pinpoint an exact definition, since so much of the principles of the male gaze relies upon the inherent power dynamics of men and women that the patriarchy upholds.

Despite this, a common mode of discussion around the female gaze is that the main aim is 'turning women into the subject of the action rather than the object of desire' (Blake, 2017). As more and more women take up higher positions of authority in the film world - a 2022 study by the Centre for the Study of Women in Television and Film women made up 26% of directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers and by role, women accounted for 8% of cinematographers, 22% of directors, 23% of writers, 27% of producers, 29% of executive producers, and 30% of editors (SDSU, 2022) - as a result, women's stories are becoming more and more of the focus within film, and women are gaining more opportunities to create stories that appeal not to the scopophilic gaze of men wanting to see sexualised women's bodies (White, 2017) but instead appeals to this denial of pleasure that Mulvey discussed.

With the male gaze centering on the active male, and the female gaze centering on the active female, it could be argued that in order to fully understand the impact and the role these gazes have upon the representation of male and female characters and the ways in which the notions of the gendered gaze impacts how they are interpreted, it is best to conduct a case study on a film that features both a male and female lead. For this, both the leads should be active in pushing the narrative forward and can be interpreted through both the male and female gaze. For this research essay case study, we will be focusing on

discussion on David Fincher's 2014 psychological thriller *Gone Girl*. This film was based on the 2012 book written by Gillian Flynn, who also wrote the screenplay for the 2014 adaptation. *Gone Girl* tells the story of the struggling marriage between Nick and Amy Dunne, which takes a dramatic turn for the worst when Amy suddenly disappears on the day of her and Nick's fifth wedding anniversary.

Gone Girl is a story of two halves - the first centres on Nick, playing into the male gaze, where the active male desperately searches not only for the passive female, but for a way to clear his name of any involvement. We only see Amy in this half through fragments of her previous existence, muddled between sweet moments of her and Nick's past and the seemingly darker reality of their present. Roughly halfway through the film, however, the story takes a sudden and sharp shift towards Amy instead, shown as the true reality of the previous mysterious missing women. It is only then that we see Amy in all her active, vicious glory - thrusting the spectators squarely into the female gaze. The story of *Gone Girl* is incomplete without either Amy or Nick's narrative presence, and without both the male and female gaze.

To look at *Gone Girl* through the male gaze, the narrative shifts the focus to highlight the struggles and the despair of Nick Dunne. By shifting the narrative more towards viewing Nick as the active lead protagonist, furthering the narrative and taking ownership over the direction of the film, and placing Amy as this Other, this object of Nick and the male gaze's desire by virtue of her womanhood, Amy's role narrative-wise feels more like an exploration on the concept of castration anxiety (Zakian, 2011). In the first half of the film, Amy places in the castration theory concept of the other, the mystique (Mulvey, 2013). She is presently like some kind of ghost haunting over Nick's life, a mysterious figure we only get the opportunity to see in fragments. We see either through the lens of Nick's romanticised idea of their past together as two witty and intelligent lovebirds, able to storm the weathers of each other's turbulent lives through their love and dedication to each other through the remnants of Amy's diaries. This then sour quickly as the troubles in their struggling marriage become more and more apparent. Amy appears to the male gaze as this almost alien-like figure that the spectator cannot truly understand - her actions and intentions a mystery, playing into the castration anxiety of the otherness of women.

When the focus shifts and Amy's true intentions and behaviour is revealed to the audience, the male gaze's castration anxiety instead turns away from this idea of the mysterious women and instead towards the much more violent ideas of castration anxiety - the role of punishment (Mulvey, 2013). When the plot twist occurs and Amy's plan for revenge against Nick for both his lack of commitment towards their assigned roles as the perfect married couple, and for his infidelity as he had begun to have extramarital affairs with a younger

women is revealed, Amy is no longer shrouded in mystery - now, she is the narrative enemy. Therefore, the male spectator now wishes to see Amy actually victimised - the male gaze now seeks pleasure and satisfaction by wanting to see Amy receive punishment for her feminine rage and vengeance. Men will often wish to seek to punish the difference created by their castration anxiety surrounding women's lack of maleness, providing them a sadistic sense of pleasure by watching women get hurt. However, the male gaze will often seek to justify this sadistic desire by presenting women in such a way that their want to see women presented on the screen as victims by men is a result of the cruel actions of the women themselves (Mulvey, 2013). Due to this, the male gaze's need to victimise Amy is narratively justified by her behaviour - she is the cruel and vindictive person in their relationship, she is the one who has ruined their marriage by staging her supposed kidnapping which transforms into the suspicion of murder at the hands of Nick, she is the revenge seeker who needs to be punished for her actions.

Another very poignant action of Nick that can be read in a unique way through the male gaze is the significance of his infidelity. Before the film, Nick has begun cheating on Amy with one of his students - in Amy's own words "a newer, younger, bouncier cool girl" (Fincher, 2014) - due to the lack of affection and sexual satisfaction that he gains from Amy. With his infidelity in mind, the actions of Amy take on a new light, in reflection of the modern era of male supremacy and incel culture. In his essay titled *Male Supremacy and the Narrowing of the Moral Self*, sociologist Michael Schwalbe states that "male supremacy narrows the moral self of men" (Schwalbe, 1992), meaning that with the rise of male supremacy and the attitude that men have an inherent right to feel a sense of superiority over women, men more and more sacrifice their sense of ethics and morality in order to continue to subjugate women to their authority.

For many, this is most apparent in the rise of incel culture. Incels, or involuntary celibates, are male supremacists that follow the belief that "women are denying them a 'right' to sex" (Broyd, J, Boniface, L, Parsons, D, Murphy, D, & Hafferty, J, 2023). Within many circles and discussion of inceldom and their beliefs, often the notion of cheating is written off as a man simply seeking out his inherent right for sex from a woman who will provide it to them, if their current partner does not satisfy their inherent needs. Since inceldom is a part of male supremacy beliefs which are in turn products of the male gaze, in this sense, Nick's act of infidelity is not considered the inherent act of cruelty that Amy sees it as, further marking her the villain in the castration anxiety narrative in desperate need of victimisation. Overall, when one looks at *Gone Girl* through the male gaze, you can see the clear image of a man suffering from his implicit castration anxiety surrounding and from his male supremacist-fueled right to sex through his infidelity.

However, many theorists argue that Amy's active role within the narrative of *Gone Girl* helps to create a unique female gaze that presents the narrative, especially the second half of the film, through an entirely uniquely feminine perspective. Through Amy's gaze, *Gone Girl* presents what it means to be a woman scorned, a woman lied too, and a woman subjected to the entitled vagrancy of the male gaze and male attitudes.

In the first half of the film, in the glimpses we see of Amy through the police's examination of her diary. We see the idea of womanhood that has been nailed in the lives of women over and over again as the result of being subjugated to the patriarchy. In their analysis of Amy Dunne, writer Rajlakshmi Kanjilal (2016) states that "as a woman, she was expected to make endless compromises and sacrifices just because it was a convenient option for her husband." Amy plays perfectly into the role of the wife that Nick wants - she answers to his every beck and whim, uproots her life for him at his convenience, subjects herself to whatever version of her that he needs. Through the female gaze, the female spectator understands and emphasises this endless pursuit. In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler (1989) states that "to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination". The female gaze understands that Amy initially desires to play into the male gaze's wants and needs for her, to be the objectified Other that the male gaze wants to see, is not her simply denying herself the right to break free from her gilded cage - it is an act of survival. Amy is willing to play the role of 'cool girl', to be what Nick wants from her, as long as Nick continues to play along with her.

All this is shattered, naturally, when Amy discovers Nick cheating on her. Suddenly, Amy's willingness to play safe by following her set behaviour within the male gaze's expectations of her only just that - expectations. Now, she is angry - but her anger is extraordinarily feminine. "The importance and visibility of women's collective anger can't be overstated. This anger takes determination, thoughtfulness, and work. It means respecting our own anger and being willing to respect the anger of other women" (Chemaly, 2018). Many feminist thinkers would agree with Chemaly's line of thinking when it comes to female rage and vengeance and how it plays out in reference to Amy's decision to enact vengeance upon Nick. Amy had been patient, she had willing and understanding, prepared to continue to sacrifice for Nick again and again if it meant that she could continue to live a surface-level perfect relationship with a man who too was genuinely prepared to risk everything just to be with her. But Nick, as many men, felt comfortable enough in his privileged position as a man safe in the confines of the patriarchy, to throw it all away in the pursuit of sexual gratification. From the female gaze where women are the active participants in the narrative, the kind of revenge that Amy seeks is only natural - Amy has given herself away from a man who does not 'want' her anymore (Kanjilal, 2016).

With this new found feminine rage, Amy is able to topple the scales of her power dynamic in a way that puts her squarely in the position of the gaze, instead of suffering from the violence of being subjected to the male gaze (Oliver, 2017). Suddenly, the look exchanged between her and Nick is not one where he, as the man, inherently gains the power over her as the object, but instead puts her as the spectator (White, 2017). She watches over Nick's life as he becomes the object, criticised for his every move, posed for the endless pleasure and desire of those who are watching him - namely, the women of the audience watching over him to work out whether or not he is an abuser and a murderer. This female gaze is shone onto both Nick and the male spectators until he finally gives Amy the voyeuristic pleasure that she seeks - by showing on national television that he is willing to play the game of their perfect marriage once again.

In the film's final moments, as Amy lies her head on Nick's stomach while she pets her hair, the moment he shows weakness, laziness, an unwillingness to put in the work to care and love her, Amy immediately subjects both him and the viewer to her unrelenting gaze. As long as Nick shows any cracks in his charade of the perfect husband Amy wants, she will present him again and again to her vengeful female gaze, reminding him of what it means to be the unwilling and uncomfortable object that men have always been free from. It could be argued that is not to say Amy puts herself in the position of the male gaze and Nick in the position of the female object - instead, it is by her womanhood, by her subjugation to the patriarchy, that she is able to create a female gaze that disturbs and disrupts the male (Mulvey, 2013).

Ultimately, Amy forges her female gaze over Nick, in the same sense female viewers and creatives forge their female gaze through putting women in positions of power.

In conclusion, from the research we have conducted into the gendered gaze and the case study that we have conducted onto *Gone Girl* we can clearly see the impacts of the representation of male and female characters through the lens of the gendered gaze and how interpretations and arcs of characters can differ dramatically when certain gazes are applied to them. Comprehensively, how audiences interpret and read the narratives presented to them on the screen is subject to the long standing expectations and rules of the patriarchal society that we live in, which results in the generation of a gaze that looks upon different people in different manners. The gaze is entirely subject to who it is gazing on and who is the spectator that is gazing - and one film can be seen in an entirely different light with different gazes in mind, such as our case study of gazing onto *Gone Girl* through the male and female gaze. For further research, many would argue the benefits of engaging with a racial or a queer gaze, as these aspects of marginalised identities also contribute a large amount to how character are presented on screen and how different audiences gaze upon, in a largely similar vein to the gendered gaze, due to the presence of implicit biases and

oppression in our society. These beliefs and ideologies play a large role in how filmmakers and audiences alike respond to characters and narratives on film. Understanding how and why we experience the gaze is imperative to understand film.

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