

## **A JOURNEY THROUGH THE FEMALE GAZE: MEDIA AND ART PERSPECTIVE**

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***Abstract.** The aim of this paper consists of identifying the specific nature of the phenomenon “female gaze” by discussing several topics from the study area of feminist aesthetics. It is shown that the predominance of the male perspective in the media makes modern society less tolerant towards gender equality, and, at the same time, the patriarchal society imposes gender-stereotyped values. On the one hand, mass media has the power to promote values due to its performativity, but on the other, it can contribute to the destabilization of the established social stereotypes due to the phenomenon of remediation. Besides, mass media can intra-act with the society, which results in the reconstitution of society’s agential reality.*

***Keywords:** agential realism, female gaze, gender equality, mass media, performativity, remediation*

### **1. Introduction**

The very nature and spirit of society are represented in modern films as part of contemporary art and media. Having analyzed the modern film industry one can easily conclude that it is characterized by fewer female protagonists in comparison to the male ones. The charts of the top-grossing movies prove the films made mostly for men and about men to have the highest numbers. For example, in the year 2020, the most selling films were “Bad Boys for Life” (two male characters fighting against a criminal gang), “1917” (two British soldiers in the First World War), and “Sonic the Hedgehog” (cartoon highlighting another story about two male protagonists). Following these statistics, there is a lack of female vision represented in modern media, even though, according to the study conducted by Webedia. Movies Pro (Rethinking Targeting: How Untapped Segments Drive Box Office Admissions: online), the female cinema audience is approximately as large as the male one.

The lack of female vision led to the creation of the “female gaze” which is now an interdisciplinary concept. Invented in the film circles of the 1970s, now it hits the high spots in all cultural spheres, including arts. Endless collections, exhibits, articles, journals, websites, and platforms are dedicated to female perspectives. However, the definition of the “female gaze” still remains ambiguous. It originated from the “male gaze” theory, which was defined by Laura Mulvey (1975) in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. As Alicia Malone (2018: 25) rightfully claims, Mulvey was simply interested in what happens to women when most of the films we watch are made by men and seen through the male gaze. In other words, the male gaze embraces a way of viewing

visual media from the perspective of a male. Laura Mulvey's theory manifested the male as an active "onlooker" or one who has the power of looking, while the female was featured as the passive object or performance.

The aim of our paper consists of discovering whether the predominance of the male perspective in the media influences society and makes it less friendly to gender equality. Or, on the other hand, whether it is the patriarchal society that imposes particular values on the media, and accordingly, whether mass media merely mirror the social trends, without suggesting anything new. Moreover, we would like to contemplate the topic of what the possible ways of representing the "female gaze" in art and media could be.

To answer these questions, we shall use the methods of content analysis and social role analysis. These methods will help us reveal the connection between media, art, and society by referring to the theories of performativity, remediation, and agential realism. We will also try to identify the specific nature of the phenomenon "female gaze" by discussing several topics from the study area of feminist aesthetics. Furthermore, we shall illustrate the process of constructing the "female gaze" using the example of Céline Sciamma's film "Portrait of a Lady on Fire" (online), as we consider it to be one of those films that redefine the position of a woman among creators and recipients of media and art.

## 2. Media and society

### 2.1. Performativity and remediation

In one of her works in the domain of Gender Media Studies, Judith Butler (1999: 381) introduces the idea of a performative quality of the gender stereotypes in the media. She explains the notion "performative", using an example of the relation of the law to an individual:

There is the policeman, the one not only who represents the law but whose address "Hey you!" has the effect of binding the law to the one who is hailed. This "one" who appears not to be in a condition of trespass prior to the call [...] is not fully a social object, is not fully subjectivated, for he or she is not yet reprimanded. The reprimand does not merely repress or control the subject but forms a crucial part of the juridical and social *formation* of the subject. The call is formative, if not performative, precisely because it initiates the individual into the subjected status of the subject.

Understood in this context, a performative is such that can socially construct the subject it is referring to. In the example above, a performative address to the subject conditions its social formation. Characterizing gender stereotypes in mass media as performative means asserting that they can create the phenomena they display by imposing particular values and behavioural patterns upon their recipients (defining their social performances). For example, if the media put stereotyped labels on men's and women's social positions, its recipients accept them as essential constituents of their public and private life.

On the other hand, the specific nature of mass media is such that they tend to constantly repeat themselves (an old song reappears in a new film, a TV-Series refers to a famous book or another TV-Series, etc.). Andrea Seier (2007: 108) describes the phenomenon of "mass media" as unfinished processes of mediatization that relate to, with, and against each other. She claims that a medium

is that which remediates, whereby the process of “remediation” is, at the same time, the process of “refashioning” or “remodelling” itself or other media. What is new about new media is the way they imitate, repeat, and re-enact older media.

The process of remediation, to which Andrea Seier (2007) refers, among other things, implies that the images appearing in older media reappear time and time again in newer media, surrounded by different updated contexts. The same ideas immersed in new contexts might gain other meanings and contribute to the destabilizing of existing stereotypes. For this reason, she characterizes media as items that constantly redefine themselves. To visualize this statement, we would like to provide an example from an episode of an American TV-Series “Castle” (“The Lives of Others”, online) that refers to Alfred Hitchcock’s “Rear Window” (1954: online): the protagonist is watching his neighbours through the window out of boredom and accidentally spots one of them killing his girlfriend. Contrary to the original film, the female protagonist in “Castle” (who does the same thing) is a working woman and cannot stay at home all day long, looking for evidence of her husband’s accusation. Thus, although both media share the same story pattern, when immersed in different realities, they tend to communicate different values.

Summarizing everything mentioned so far, we assume that mass media contribute significantly to both establishing and undermining social conventions and stereotypes, including those related to gender. It follows that there is a deep connection between media and society, and we would like to take a closer look at it further.

## 2.2. Film and agential reality

Karen Barad’s (1998) theory of agential realism offers a plausible approach to understanding the relationship between mass media and society. One of its fundamental terms is that of “intra-action”, which she (1998: 96) defines as a contrast to interaction:

I introduce the neologism “intra-action” to signify the inseparability of “objects” and “agencies of observation” (in contrast to “interaction”, which reinscribes the contested dichotomy).

Understood in this way, the term “intra-action” implies that its constituents not only affect one another (not only interact), but also mutually enable each other’s existence. The interrelation between, for example, such media as film, and society can also be considered an intra-action: on the one hand, films (along with the social environment, books, music, etc.) significantly contribute to establishing the society (it cannot be as it is without the influence of the film industry), but on the other hand, films are created by and for the society and, for this reason, must follow its social conventions and aesthetic canons.

According to Karen Barad (1998), the intra-action of an object (for example, a film) and an agency of observation (for example, a viewer, as s/he decodes and interprets the pictures on the screen) has the power to reconstitute the agential reality (the reality, which is not independent of human practices). Thus, if the relationship between film and society is an intra-action, one can conclude that this relationship has the capacity to contribute to the reconstitution of society’s agential reality.

To illustrate this statement, we would like to refer to Eisenstein's technique of intellectual montage (*Ocherki istorii kino SSSR. Nemo kino: 1918–1934 god*: online). Its basic assumption is that, by combining different unrelated narratively shots, possessing a symbolic quality, one might impose intellectual activity on the audience, which can result in particular thoughts and even concepts. Their meaning, however, should not be understood logically, but rather unconsciously, associatively, and emotionally. Accordingly, within the framework of this method, the intra-action of human cognition and symbolic images constructs ideas related to what the state of reality is.

The scene from Eisenstein's "Strike" (ibid.) which juxtaposes the shot of killing the workers with the one of killing cattle in the slaughterhouse is a vivid example of how one can integrate the above-described technique into a feature film. This juxtaposition aims at making the audience associate the shooting with the slaughterhouse, which imposes the idea that the bourgeoisie treats the proletariat like cattle and thus triggers social hostility towards the bourgeoisie.

One can conclude that the strong interdependency between film and society lies in the fact that the film has the power to reconstitute people's agential reality and, simultaneously, is significantly dependent on them, as it is made by them and for them. For this reason, the film industry must not merely deliver patriarchal values, but also provide enough space for a so-called female subjectivity. The reason we consider it to be important is that, on the one hand, a film has the power to influence the position of women in society, and, on the other hand, it indicates social progress in terms of gender equality. In this regard, we would like to pose a question: what are the ways of expressing female subjectivity in the film? In our perspective, one of the possible answers to this question can be found within the framework of feminist aesthetics.

### **3. Through the female artists' gaze**

#### **3.1. The problem of female art**

One of the most fundamental ideas of feminist film theory is that of Laura Mulvey (1975): she states that society's patterns of representation are instituted within the framework of patriarchal order and dominated by a so-called "male gaze". The notion of a "male gaze" defines, among other things, the process of framing the objects of visual art in such a way that perceiving their value implies accepting the "masculine" perspective of appreciation. In other words, the feminist theory asserts that, when it comes to visual arts, there is either little or no space for a woman as a viewer of it, but only for a woman as an object in it.

When contemplating the topic of art, Teresa de Lauretis (1985: 160) once said:

Art is what is enjoyed publicly rather than privately, has an exchange value rather than a use value, and that value is conferred by socially established aesthetic canons.

Karsten Harries (2012: online), on the contrary, suggests that it is the work of art, the power that establishes the space of meanings within the society: the way of life and thinking, the cultural context, etc. Understood in this way, art has an ethical function: it establishes a particular ethos. It is thus concluded that the

interrelation between art and society follows the same paradigm as that of mass media and society.

The assumption that the historical domain of art and aesthetics is patriarchal created the new area of research for feminist scientists – the “feminist aesthetics”. Despite the way it sounds, this term does not refer to a particular aesthetics or style but rather comprises a collection of perspectives that question assumptions concerning gender-role stereotypes. Gisela Ecker (1986: 15), for example, describes feminist aesthetics as a mere catchword under which many points against essentialism are normally brought forward. Thus, feminist aesthetics can be defined as a collection of works that aim at speaking against the socially contracted concept of “gender” and discrediting many of the quasi-genuine features characteristic to either women or men.

The research in the field of feminist aesthetics started with the query posted by Linda Nochlin (1988) in her famous essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, which was followed by several other texts, with titles such as *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work* (Greer 1979), *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (Parker, Pollock 1981), *Art and Sexual Politics: Women’s Liberation, Women Artists, and Art History* (Hess, Baker 1973), *Feminism and Aesthetics* (Brandt 2003). etc. As one can see, the words “art” and “women” were the most common among the titles of the research at that time, and, thus it is easy to conclude that feminist aesthetics started as an attempt to more or less systematically contemplate the role and position of women in art.

Silvia Bovenschen (1986: 49) made an important statement regarding the status of feminine aesthetics as a phenomenon:

Is there a feminine aesthetic? Certainly, there is, if one is talking about *aesthetic awareness* and *modes of sensory perception*. Certainly, not, if one is talking about an unusual variant of artistic production or about a painstakingly constructed theory of art.

In the author’s perspective, women do have aesthetic awareness and perception and, therefore, the right to, on the one hand, express themselves as artists and, on the other, fulfil their aesthetic needs as the appreciators of art. At the same time, one should not mistake the phenomenon of feminine aesthetics for a particular style or technique that needs separation from male art.

Gisela Breitling (1986: 167) highlighted in detail the issue of female artists being classified due to their gender:

You won’t find Paula Modersohn-Becker’s pictures in the Worpswede room of the Kunsthalle in Bremen – they hang in a special room. However, when displayed in the context of her male contemporaries, as in the Städelische Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt, her qualities become apparent – only then does her power, her expansiveness, her sensibility for color become apparent – or in the National Gallery in Berlin where two of her pictures hang side by side with Schmitt-Rotluff and Otto Müller. The company of her male contemporaries highlights how no one so far has adequately allotted her rightful place [...]. She needs to be placed in the context from which she comes, on which she calls, which she defies, and which she transcends, for otherwise her achievement and the goals of her art remain hidden [...]. We cannot do women’s creativity justice so long as we consider it in an exclusively female context.

Accordingly, one of the significant issues within the framework of feminist aesthetics is that of classification and comparison: female artists should be placed amongst and compared only to those who possess the same artistic style, background, etc., but not to those of the same sex. Understanding the value of the piece of art is much more complicated if it is not placed among the representatives of the same movement or period. Such positioning leads to its underappreciation. Another valid argument speaking for this approach is that it secures the position of women among the audience, as it provides them with an opportunity to identify with the female vision without leaving the realm of the “general” art and media.

Providing men and women with an equal position among creators and recipients of arts and media products is what we consider one of the possible approaches to rooting the phenomenon of the “female gaze” in society. To demonstrate one of the possibilities for the implementation of this idea, we would like to refer to Celine Sciamma’s film “Portrait of a Lady on Fire” (online) and analyse several particular aspects of it.

### **3.2. Celine Sciamma’s perspective**

“Portrait of a Lady on Fire” (online) tells the story of an affair between a female artist, Marianne, and her sitter, Heloise, that took place in the 1760s in France. Marianne was hired to paint Heloise’s portrait, which is to be sent to Milan to Heloise’s potential fiancé. Another artist had already been hired for this job, but he never finished the painting: Heloise refused to sit for him, as she didn’t want to get married. This is the reason why Marianne was introduced to Heloise not as an artist, but as a companion for walks, whereas Marianne’s actual intention was to paint Heloise from memory.

The first aspect we would like to bring to attention is the beginning of the film, where the female protagonist continues the work of the male artist and is supposed to fulfil the same function as he did earlier. Moreover, their paintings will later be compared, which implies certain similarities of their works and places the artists on the same level: at the beginning of the film there is a shot of Heloise’s unfinished portrait painted by him, and approximately in the middle, there is a shot of Heloise’s portrait made by Marianne. In this way, the film raises the idea of artistic equality of men and women: Marianne and the male artist are working in the same field, on the same subject, and for this reason, she has a right to continue his work. Also, the finished portraits are allowed to be compared, and accordingly, aligned, regardless of their authors’ gender. Such an approach emphasizes their mutual right to express their visions and allows appreciation of the quality of Marianne’s work, in spite of her gender.

This film also solves the problem of the insufficient possibility for the audience to identify with the “female gaze”, as it creates double female subjectivity, by telling a story about a female artist, written and directed by a woman. Moreover, it is not for this reason banished into the special field of exclusively “female” cinema: it got the prize for the Best Screenplay at Cannes, where it was nominated along with films directed by men.

There is another peculiar feature of the film, which we would like to discuss in more detail: there are no male characters in the entire film and it makes every viewer, male or female, identify with a woman while watching it. To prove this point, we would like to refer to Carl Plantinga’s (2004) article “Die Szene der Empathie und der menschliche Gesicht” (“The Scene of Empathy and the Human

Face’). In the article, he reports on an experiment in which the students’ reaction to short films, which display speakers telling either happy or sad stories, was secretly recorded. It turned out that the audience always mirrored all the facial expressions of the storytellers. Following Carl Plantinga, such imitation facilitates developing imitated emotions. Thus, due to the unconscious imitation of the facial expression of the characters, the audience tends to develop empathy for them. Sigmund Freud (1982) once made a statement that empathy can only arise from identification with others (which can range from strong and intense to partial and extremely limited). Consequently, when watching films, the audience always assimilates (at least partially) with the characters on the screen. And the fact that “Portrait of a Lady on Fire” displays only female characters can only mean that its audience, regardless of their gender, has no other choice but to identify with a woman and with a “female gaze” accordingly.

Thus, we would like to conclude by stating that “Portrait of a Lady on Fire” offers one of the possible ways of constructing the “female gaze” in the film industry. Firstly, because, by raising the question of artistic equality of men and women, it secures the position of a woman among creators and emphasizes her right to express an artistic vision without being banished to the “female domain”. And secondly, because by giving her an opportunity to finally identify with the “female gaze” (moreover, by offering the same possibility to the male audience), it secures her position within the audience.

#### 4. Conclusion

The predominance of the male perspective represented in mass media has the power to promote patriarchal values in society. The reason for this lies in the fact that, firstly, mass media is performative (it can create the subjects it is referring to), and secondly, because it intra-acts with the society, which can result in the reconstitution of the society’s agential reality. Since the media is made by and for society, it must follow all its canons and conventions. Thus, the answer to the question of whether media imposes particular values on society or merely mirrors the existing ones would be that it does both. Moreover, as the media tend to remediate, they can contribute to the destabilization of the established social stereotypes by immersing existing ideas into new contexts and creating new ones.

Consequently, mass media, on the one hand, can influence the position of women in society, and, on the other hand, indicate social progress in terms of gender equality. It also has the capacity to discredit established gender stereotypes. In this regard, the female vision must find sufficient representation in it. Nowadays, there are some successful media projects which offer approaches to constructing the “female gaze” and making it as powerful as the male one.

We can name, for instance, Celine Sciamma’s film “Portrait of a Lady on Fire”, firstly, because it highlights the story about a female artist, written and directed by a woman. Secondly, because it solves the issue of female artists’ classification (at least within its framework). And thirdly, because it does not leave the audience any possibility other than identifying with a female perspective.

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