

“Female Gaze” from the View of a Female Director Analysis of the Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful and the Old Town Girls as Examples

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Abstract: Since Laura Mulvey innovated the gaze theory, European and American societies have experienced two waves of feminist revolutions, and women's social status has gradually increased. Thus in recent years, many filmmakers have begun to create films from women's perspectives, and critics have also created the term "Female Gaze" as an opposite to the term "Male Gaze". However, there has not been any clear definition so far of what the "Female Gaze" is. The film and television analysis nowadays pays more attention to the female-to-female gaze and female-to-male gaze in romantic relationships and ignores the role of female directors play in shaping the relationship of film characters, especially the non-romantic relationships between female characters. Influenced by the feminist current, China's feminist films have also made great progress. Male and female directors have created new female roles through the lens. However, the different portrayals of female characters in the female-led films reflect the differences between Male Gaze and "Female Gaze". This paper will take *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* and *The Old Town Girls* as examples, by analyzing these two female-led films directed by a male and a female respectively, this paper will explore the main features of "Female Gaze" in female directing films.

Keywords: Male gaze, Female gaze, Film study

1. Introduction

The term Male Gaze was first proposed by Laura Mulvey in 1975 in her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Carrying on the trend of the woman liberation movement in Europe and America in the 1960s, she introduced Freud's psychoanalyst theory into feminist film research in the context of the post-structuralism ideological trend and initiated the psychoanalytic feminist film research. Focusing on gender and power in cinema, she proposed that the lens of the film represents the peering eyes of the male, and created the term "Male based on the gaze theory. The female characters on the screen are repeatedly watched and exploited by the directors and the photographers, the actors in the film, and the male audience outside the film, and thus the status of male as the subject and female as

the object is established. Three different types of Male Gaze, narcissist, voyeuristic and fetishistic bring visual pleasure to the male audience.

Andre Bazin summed up the author's theory as "choosing personalized elements as relevant measures, and then continuously implementing them into one work after another" [1], which shows that the directors play a very important role in shaping the characters in their films. *The Bold*, *the Corrupt*, and *the Beautiful* and *The Old Town Girls* are both China's recent crime films with a group of female characters, which focus on the relationships between women, particularly the mother-daughter relationship and sisterhood, but the results are quite different. The female image in the former one is relatively flat and simplified while that in the latter one is round, complicated, and diversified. Considering that the two films are produced by all-man and all-woman teams respectively, this paper will try to prove the only variable is the director's gender and his or her gender perspective through the following analysis. In *The Old Town Girls*, the female director shoots and constructs different female images through props, shots, and story development, revealing the spirit of female rebellion, and making a brand new interpretation of the "Female Gaze".

2. Analysis and Comparison of Female Images in the Two Films

The Bold, *the Corrupt*, and *the Beautiful* depicts the life of three generations of women in the Tang family: the grandmother "Mrs. Tang" Tang She Yueying, the mother Tang Ning, and the granddaughter Tang Zhen. Running an antique business, Mrs. Tang was ambitious, active in the political and business circles, making profits secretly by insidious means. Her daughter Tang Ning regarded as a plaything by her mother, was often given away to the powerful and the rich in exchange for interests. To cover up the family scandal of Tang Ning's unmarried birth, Mrs. Tang claimed that her granddaughter Tang Zhen was her daughter, Tang Ning's little sister. Tang Zhen, a girl who just reached puberty, was obedient to her grandmother's command most of the time, but the seeds of rebellion were already buried in her heart.

2.1. The Analysis of Tang Ning's Image

Portrayed as a typical "femme fatale" in film noir, she is the most concentrated embodiment of the Male Gaze in *The Bold*, *the Corrupt*, and *the Beautiful*. She dealt with Mrs. Wang - President of the legislature's wife, Mrs. Lin, The Speaker's special assistant, and other ladies with ease, captured the body and loyalty of the Myanmar killer brothers Duan Zhong and Duan Yi with her sexual charm, and lured Sergeant Liao and threatened him with nude photos. At the beginning of the film, the director lets Tang Zhen and Mrs. Lin's daughter peep at the explicit sex scenes between Tang Ning and the Duan brothers, and the director points a close-up at Tang Ning's distorted face. In the film, she often wore black silk pajamas Mrs. Tang bought for her, which symbolizes her role as a men's plaything. The close-up of her naked skin under pajamas is intended to show the beauty and sexual attraction of Tang Ning's body, not only for the eyes of the male characters in the films but also for the male audience. Laura Mulvey said, "Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen." [2] So is the "Femme Fatale" image of Tang Ning successfully constructed, serving as a sex object to men. Due to the limitation of Male Gaze, the director does not deeply dig into the relationship with her daughter Tang Zhen, nor does he give her enough subjective initiative. Instead, he lets her indulge in sex and drugs, give up on herself, and finally reach the end of self-destruction by disobeying Mrs. Tang's order. When dealing with this complex and deep character, the director mainly focuses on her scheming and sexy characteristics, failing to probe into the character's different sides.

2.2. Comparison of Female Group Portraits

Through the following analysis, it can be concluded that the Male Gaze simplifies and flattens the female image in *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful*, while the "Female Gaze" helps the female director shape diversified and complicated female characters in *The Old Town Girls*.

The main female characters in *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* have nearly the same characters: sinister, cunning, selfish, cruel, and duplicitous. Mrs. Tang was the master of the Tang mansion, who compromised the dignity of her daughter on the way to success and killed the whole family of her friend Mrs. Lin ruthlessly; the special assistant of the speaker was kind and amiable on the surface, but her mask fell off when she tortured the reporter and hired killers to kill a civil servant; the county magistrate's wife pretended to mourn the death of The Lins, and later kept Mrs. Lin's jade jewelry for herself.

Laura Mulvey summed up the main function of female characters in classic films: "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female"[2], which means women under the male gaze mainly play a passive role, be in the visual presentation or in the storyline. Although *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* manages to break the above two barriers, it still can not be called a "feminist film" and is still influenced by Male Gaze, for it fails "to unravel, to question, to reinvent the terrain of popular fantasy in which women's secondary status is sealed by the collective psyche"[3], which is considered by Laura Mulvey as the aim of the feminism movement. The main female characters in this film became the spokespeople and the "hired thug" of the patriarchal society of their own free will, showing no subjectivity or self-consciousness as females. Under the title of "Mrs", although they were close to power and they were doing whatever it took to secure the political and social status of their husbands, they are excluded from the core of the power, only allowed to serve as an assistant for their husbands in a secondary position. Sly as Mrs. Tang was, she also added her late husband General Tang's surname before her surname "She", hung his portrait on the wall in the living room, and relied on the power of his subordinates in the army. At the end of the film, the meeting between Mrs. Tang and The General Secretary Mr. Feng suggests the real purpose of the whole plan was to assist her secret lover elected as the Mayor of Taipei. As usual, men are those in power that matter. It is not only a reflection of reality in then Taiwan but also the manifestation of how Male Gaze affects and restrains male directors and screenwriters when creating female characters.

The director made good use of the female gaze to create multiple images of women in *The Old Town Girls*, which sought a new angle of expression for the mutual redemption of the female group, especially the vulnerable part. In that film, Shuiqing, Jin Xi, and Ma Yueyue, three girls of the same age have their pains that are hard to be expressed to others due to their complicated families of origin. With a free and easy character, Jin Xi is a bold and rich second generation with irreverence, but outsiders did not know that her parents had already incurred huge debts and left her behind at home. Facing crazy debt collectors, she chose to replace mental torture with physical pain, pressing the hot curling stick against her arms. Because her father made a living outside the town, Ma Yueyue has been fostered by her godfather's wealthy family. After Ma Yueyue returned to live with her father, she found that her father was an extremely controlling parent. He would smash things and even hurt himself just because he could not get through to his daughter's phone. Quting presented herself to the three girls with mysterious features. She was exceedingly fascinating and charming, living in the basement of the old theater. She was able to come and go at will. Her freedom enables the three girls to feel a glimmer of hope to escape from their plight. During the night when Quting drove them for a ride, Shuiqing could not help popping her head out of the window to feel the cool rain. The rain is the joy of her mother's return to Shuiqing; a confession to the boy she had a crush on for Jin Xi, and an attempt to break away from her father for Ma Yueyue[4].

3. The Comparison of Mother-Daughter Relationships

Both of the films describe the relationships between mother and daughter. This paper mainly analyzes and compares the relationship between Tang Ning and Tang Zhen, and between Qu Ting and Shui Qing. Both mothers did not fulfill their motherhood responsibilities and were absent in their daughters' growth, so their mother-daughter relationships were indifferent and even horrible. They were more like sisters or girlfriends rather than mother and daughter. However, the ways the two films shape the mother-daughter relationship are very different. Through the analysis, it can be found that under the influence of Male Gaze, the male director neglects to exhume the psychology of female characters, and the depiction of the mother-daughter relationship is superficial, while the female director uses "Female Gaze" to restore the complex, real and delicate mother-daughter relationship, providing a unique female perspective.

The director of *The Bold*, *the Corrupt*, and *the Beautiful* focuses on the physical charm of Tang Ning, which results in a lack of the real image of Tang Ning from the perspective of Tangzhen. The sex scene Tang Zhen oversaw was not depicted from the perspective of a daughter, but from the male perspective represented by the director, to satisfy men's peering eyes inside and outside the screen - "Women displayed as a sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle"[2]. As a daughter and virgin, Tang Zhen was confused and disgusted by the combination of the images of "mother" and "slut", which reflects the director's Madonna-Whore Complex[5]. The mother Tang Ning is twisted by the director, thus the mother-daughter relationship is also distorted, mostly imagined by the director.

In *The Old Town Girls*, the director dealt with the mother-daughter relationship between Quting and Shuiqing in a detailed and real stroke. The film shows us the audience the story of a lonely grown-up girl and her litter daughter, who warmed each other and redeemed each other until they lost control. One nightfall, Shuiqing found the photo of her mother and gently touched it. At that time, she might believe that she will meet her mother one day. She lay on an old and shabby sofa, lighting the lighter. The faint sparkle lighted her heart up, just as hope drove her to make decisions. That night, Shuiqing snuck home and found her mother's phone number on her father's phone. She attempted to text her mother. On a sunshine morning, Shu Qing met her mother Quting at the rice noodles place. She was wearing a yellow dress and leaning on the stone platform, looking so bright and charming. Shuiqing ran away in a panic when she saw her. At the school gate, Quting came to pick up Shuiqing in a yellow car, so the mother and daughter met. "If you are lucky, once you get out of the tunnel, you can go back to the most precious moment in your life"[6]. I suppose this moment should be the most precious one that Shuiqing wants to stay. The long-awaited mother returned to her side, and her desire was temporarily satisfied, which ignited her lifeless life.

The presence of Quting brought Shuiqing a new desire for love, whereas Quting found her attachment and concern in Shuiqing. Quting cut off half of Shuiqing's long hair. The two gradually got to know each other, which made them more appreciate each other. Shuiqing told Quting her memory of her parents in childhood, blurred but warm memories kept Quting away from the troubles in the real world temporarily. It seemed that she has found her young self.

The redemption and bondage between the two exuded the most instinctive desire of women. Although the relationship between females is weak in the film by a female director, it always finds a way to light up each other[7]. "I am willing to do anything for you." This is Shuiqing's protection of Quting after countless nights of constraint thoughts, and also her self-redemption. The director's description of the mother-daughter relationship between Quting and Shuiqing is more profound, while empowering them with more subjective initiative and rebellious spirit.

4. The Comparison of Male Characters

The male characters are few and marginalized in both films but are dealt with in different ways. In *The Bold*, *the Corrupt*, and *the Beautiful*, the male director uses the Male Gaze to empower the male characters, while in *The Old Town Girls*, the female director uses the "Female Gaze" to skillfully subvert the traditional male image and jeopardize the self-identification process of the male audience as the male characters.

The male characters in *The Bold*, *the Corrupt*, and *the Beautiful* can be roughly divided into two categories, neither of which breaks the stereotype of the traditional male image: the first category of men are the ladies' husbands - those in power, such as and General Secretary Mr. Feng; the second category are the men with lower social status than the main female characters, such as the groom Marco, the Duan killer brothers.

"A male movie star's glamorous characteristics are thus not these erotic object of the gaze, but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror." [1] Laura said so. The first type of male character, with control over Taiwan's commerce and politics, driving women to do dirty work for them, while they were sitting back and enjoying is no doubt the perfect image of traditional men - powerful and dominant. The second type of men seems to fail to fit in the descriptions in the first place since they were the "chess pieces" and "playthings" of the wives. However, they had other ways - sex and violence, often combine, to overturn the advantages of upper-class women, regain power, and affirm their superiority over women. For instance, as only subordinates to Mrs. Tang, the Duan killer brothers took back the dominance as the director spares no effort in rendering and enlarging the fragility, pain, and confusion of the heroine during a sex scene with close-ups. Another example is Marco the groom who transferred his hatred from upper-class women sexually exploiting him to his admirer Tang Zhen, raped her, and finally affirmed his subjectivity by destroying and dominating her body. Such a plot is designed to satisfy the male audience's needs for self-identification as "the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego" [1].

On the opposite, *The Old Town Girls* subverts the traditional male image and breaks down such a self-identification process. The female director creates a number of irresponsible, weak, and selfish fathers through the lens, which are very different from the great and strong father images in traditional film and television. Shui Qing's father could not protect her in front of her stepmother and was overwhelmed by his ex-wife's unexpected visit and intrusion into his private space, his grocery store. Faced with his daughter's rich adoptive parents, Ma Yueyue's father could only resort to domestic abuse and self-harming to seek his daughter's attention. In one scene of the conversation between Ma's father and the adoptive parents, the director lets the adoptive parents stand on the steps with their magnificent restaurant behind while the biological father down the steps with the gray and dusty pavement in the background. By comparing the standing positions and the different backgrounds of the two parties, the director suggests their gap in social status, wealth, and education. Furthermore, by highlighting the embarrassment and shame on the father's face, she uses "Female Gaze" to present a more real male image from a female perspective, subtly and tactfully breaking men's self-recognition as strong or powerful, and destructing the self-identification of men, thus it is conducive to the construction of female consciousness.

5. Conclusion

In the films *The Bold*, *the Corrupt*, and *the Beautiful* and *The Old Town Girls*, the female characters and female relationships in the two films are shown from different directors' perspectives. These two perspectives reveal the differences between the female characters under the female gaze and the female characters under the male gaze and the relationships between women. Thus, they reflect the

feminist ideology of the female characters under the female gaze rejecting and resisting the objectification by men and pornography under the traditional male gaze. Moreover, in the context of a patriarchal society, women under the female director's gaze are mutually supportive and resist together, as opposed to the vicious competitive relationship between women under the male gaze. Susan Sontag mentions in *About Photography* that "the act of filming is not merely passive observation [8]. Thus, the shot under the director's gaze is not just about passive observation, but more about the meaning contained in how it is shot. Laura Mulvey refers to the female figure under the male gaze as being noticed or viewed [2]. Therefore, the image of women under the male and female director's gaze also leads to a different image of women on the screen.

In the film *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful*, the male director portrays three different images of women. All three include Tang She Yueying, who trades sex for power, Tang Ning, who is outwardly indulgent and unrestrained but inwardly obedient to her mother, and Tang Zhen, who is always docile and submissive. Tang She Yueying appears to be an independent woman who is in control of her own power and can support herself completely, but she is more like a woman who has been poisoned by a patriarchal society. She objectifies women and trades them for money in order to gain independence in the broad sense of the word. In the film, Tang-Ning is used as sex trade, a woman who conforms to the male gaze as sexy, promiscuous and sexually active with multiple men. The behavior and actions of women in this genre are sexually suggestive. For example, close-ups are taken of TangNing's legs and bare back. When filming her having sex with a man, the director also uses close-ups to capture her facial expressions as she strokes his thighs with her hands and moans. In addition, the director uses close-ups to film Tang Ning sticking her tongue out to lick a bullet necklace. The bullets here also imply the male genitalia. The "Male Gaze" also refers to male directors who manipulate or organize gaze shots, who specialize in directing the action and highlighting female stars on the screen in a very erotic or sexy way" [2]. Tang Zhen is a girl who grew up under the influence of Tang She Yueying. Tang Zhen is raped by a servant under the grooming of Tang She Yueying, thus becoming a replica of Tang She Yueying. These three characters encompass the male director's portrayal of women as sexy, well-behaved, and at the same time unable to control their own bodies. The other is a woman who has control over her own body but achieves independence by taking advantage of other women who are dependent on men for their status and power and who trade money with them.

In *The Old Town Girls*, a work by a female director, Qu Ting, Shui Qing, Jin Xi and Ma Yueyue all rebel against male control of their lives, as opposed to *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful*. Qu Ting is a female figure who intertwines feminism and patriarchy. In the film, she acts as a mother. Her smoking and swearing break the traditional moral constraints and control over women in a patriarchal society. In particular, in the Chinese historical context, when a woman enters marriage she is marginalized and subordinated, and then further exploited by childbirth and labor [9]. As a result, when a woman enters the family her image is fixed and standardized, and thus she loses herself. Instead, Qu Ting's tone, movements and clothes reveal her own sensuality and vitality. For example, in the film, Qu Ting's curly hair, and dresses. In addition, her yellow dress, car, and shoes show that she is not tied down and oppressed by her family and male society. In terms of plot development, Qu Ting is constantly fighting against and free from male physical oppression, but the reality of the situation is that she is forced to trade in her body in order to stay alive.

Neither in *The Old Town Girls* nor *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* are men portrayed in detail, but in *The Old Town Girls* the director films the relationship between women more as women helping women than in *Blood Watch*. The MeToo movement in North America in 2017 sparked widespread outrage among Chinese women on the topic of sexual harassment, and as a result, women in China also launched online feminist movements [10], such as the sexual harassment of female interns by the famous host Zhu Jun in 2018 and the sexual abuse of his adopted daughter by Bao

Yuming in 2020. Under the influence of the MeToo movement, the concept of girls helping girls was thus invoked. The Old Town Girls is a film made in 2020, which also contains this concept. When Qu Ting is forced to be sexually assaulted, Shui Qing stands in her way, while at the same time she is physically threatened by a male, and Qu Ting stands in her way. Thus, by analyzing the relationship between the female figure and women in the film The Old Town Girls, it is possible to show that the female figure and the relationship between women under the female director's gaze is feminist. The female figure under the female gaze refuses to contain too much sexuality and desire concerning men, and shows more of an independent and rebellious spirit.

The two films, The Old Town Girls and The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful, indirectly explain the patriarchal nature of the female figure from the male director's perspective and the tragic ending. Conversely, the female director's view of women becomes the antithesis of the male director's view of women. After the Third Feminist Movement, as contemporary women, women have gradually gained the right to gaze. When women have the right to gaze at their own kind, this gaze contains a rebellion against the long-standing male gaze. It also expresses more about herself and the contemporary situation of women in a patriarchal society.

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