

The Hidden Scopophilia in Wild (2014) and Its Contribution to Feminist Road Film

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Abstract: The power of movie in portraying feminist women are incredible, especially when movie are viewed as a low threshold art form. As early as 1965, Russ Meyer directed a feminist road movie called *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* Since then, the protagonists of road movies have a second gender besides males. After *Thelma and Louise* achieving great success in 1991, feminist road movies instantly became a craze, and many directors began making films with similar themes, such as *Leaving Normal* (1992) and *Boys on the Side* (1995). The film *Wild* (2014), directed by Jean-Marc Vallée and written by Nick Hornby, based on the 2012 memoir *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* by Cheryl Strayed, focuses on the personal growth of woman in hiking. However, like many other feminist road movies, although the director tries to tell women's stories, create strong female character and reimagine story structure, but still maintains the pleasure of looking. This article starts with camera language analysis to interpret scopophilia and the to-be-looked-at-ness of female character wrapped in the innovative feminist stories and intentions.

Keywords: Cinefeminism, Male Gaze, Gender Study, Camera Language, Film Study.

1. Introduction

Film art uses a unique visual approach to showcase a sensory understanding of feminism directly. Cinema not only can articulate desires for a better world and, through its intricate methods of interpretation and representation, can foster both critique and novel ways of perception. This is especially true for feminism, where cinema simultaneously serves as a significant oppressive force against women through its imagery and as a vehicle for liberation by transforming and reinventing its forms and conventions [1]. From the 1960s to the 1980s, American road movies were represented by *Easy Rider* (1969), with men as the main characters, telling the stories and relationships of men. Women played erotic and passive roles in it, without the ability to drive the plot, and could only be passively looked at by men. Laura Mulvey explains: "Woman, then, stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of a woman still tied to her place as the bearer of meaning, not the maker of meaning." Just as traditional gender roles lead women to rely on men for survival, women in movies also rely on men for narrative control. The great success of *Thelma and Louise* and numerous feminist road movies shattered the dominance of men in the world of road movies. Ridley Scott and other feminist filmmakers cast actresses who are not very beautiful as the main characters in road movies, placing female characters in the center of

the camera and telling the stories and relationships of women. Nevertheless, this genre (feminist road movie) has faced unprecedented questioning and criticism. One persuasive argument is that these films are merely male buddy road movies disguised in female attire, reflecting men's fantasies about life on the road [2]. This statement holds merit because, from the lens language analysis, whether it is the close-ups of the protagonists holding their hands tightly, the establishing shots of cars speeding through the desert, or the close-ups of billowing car exhaust, these can all be seen as the reproduction of traditional American buddy road films, with the protagonists being female. This inevitably leads to the question: do female characters display traits other than appearance that differ from male characters at specific points?

In the 20th century, feminism emerged as a prominent theme in artistic expression, particularly in American culture, where it has evolved into a cultural symbol. Wild (2014), adapted from Cheryl Strayed's autobiographical novel, tells the story of a woman who embarked on a 94-day hike along the Pacific Crest Trail following her mother's death. This movie portrays a woman who has become irrelevant to others. We are accustomed to seeing women entangled in relationships with parents, men, and children, or strained friendships with other women [3], so it is striking, almost jarring, to encounter an image of a woman who is brilliantly, purposefully, and utterly alone. As a woman, Cheryl Strayed engages in hiking, a traditionally male sport, achieving a record that most men could not reach. It's not so much that she's challenging her own physical and mental limits, but rather that she's using her body and spirit to challenge traditional male society and masculinity. She vividly expresses her feminist views and her unwavering pursuit of feminism. The film revolves around a woman alone in the wilderness, marking a new narrative direction for 21st-century female road movies. However, despite the film's feminist intentions and strong female characters, the male gaze is omnipresent in the filmmakers' use of cinematography. For example, when the camera is facing women, are close-up shots more commonly used, medium, and long shots are more widely used when the camera is facing men even if they are in a same contest? When both male and female characters appear in the camera, will the audience be brought into the male perspective to observe the female? Are these shots still or moving? Did the camera travel over the female body or break it into parts to be looked at? Who is taking these shaky shots from?

The history of the cinema is the history of women's to-be-looked-at-ness, built as it is on the mechanism of voyeurism [4]. Sigmund Freud said: "Visual impressions remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused [5]." In the following text, the author will analyze three scenes of woman being gazed in the beginning of Wild and how this film is feminist.

2. Analysis and Interpretation of Camera Language

The movie begins with an establishing shot in the wilderness. The background sound was only whistling wind in the first few seconds, but immediately, the audience heard a strong wheeze from a woman. Because there are no other elements to explain, until a hiking boot appears in front of the screen, the scene is more likely to be perceived as a woman having sex behind the camera rather than a woman hiking in the mountains. Why does the director want the audience to have such a misunderstanding that goes against the movie's theme? This does not make the film more feminist, but instead leads the audience to assume that it is a road movie full of male fantasies. When the camera was aimed at the female protagonist Cheryl Strayed, the audience suddenly realized that these gasps were due to the severe wounds on her feet caused by her hiking boots. Although the filmmaker uses medium shots and long shots most often in the first scene, the pornographic presupposition in the beginning still gives a solid feeling for women outside the screen that this is a movie made by a man with a weak feminist consciousness. However, the footage of the female protagonist's actions in this scene still portrays an independent, strong, and fearless female image for us. Cheryl Strayed has her toenails completely fall off. She manually removes and throws away her toenails, inadvertently

dropping her crucial hiking shoe into a mountain stream. Enraged, she frenziedly throws the other shoe off the cliff and shrieks hysterically into the valley. This dramatic scene and plot immediately convey to the audience that during her hiking journey, Cheryl is challenging her physical and pain thresholds and pushing her spiritual endurance to its limits. The valley's shouts seem like a form of cathartic venting, but they are a cry for herself and the world at large. She seeks to assert her presence through this extreme sporting challenge, demonstrating to the world her feminine bravery and a perseverance equal to that of men. Thus, Cheryl consistently viewed hiking as her chosen lifestyle; she was not the "homeless woman" as described by the journalist she met along the way. She embarked on this hiking journey as an emancipated woman [6].

The next scene tells the story of Cheryl's first night hiking the Pacific Crest Trail when she arrived in California from Minnesota. Her pronounced dark circles under her eyes and the subdued ambiance of the hotel suggest that she's not overly enthusiastic at the moment. Furthermore, reminiscing memories show her uncertainty about her ability to complete the hike. Then, the camera moved on to a messy table filled with her hiking gear. Cheryl picked up a whistle, followed by another close-up of the spoon. When she put the whistle in her mouth, unexpectedly, two sexual scenes flashed very quickly here.

The first shot is a shaking shot aimed at her chest and her face, in which the audience is forced to enter the perspective of the man who is having sex with Cheryl. This way, the audience outside the screen is brought into the male perspective. When the spectators look at her face, they finally learned the visual connection between the sex scene and the whistle, which was Cheryl holding the man's finger in her mouth during sex, so it's easy to assign a pornographic meaning to the object of whistling, imagining it as a man's penis. In terms of narrative technique, this can be understood as a foreshadowing because, at this moment, the spectator knows nothing about Cheryl's experience before hiking. This quick scene allows the audience to glimpse the tip of the iceberg of her previous life and thus become curious about why Cheryl embarked on her PCT journey. However, focusing the camera on the female body should not be the only form of this narrative purpose. A question worth asking is which groups' voyeuristic desires are satisfied by such fantasies.

The second sex scene is very blurry compared to the previous one. To be precise, it should be a silhouette of two people having sex against the wall. The director used a long shot here, but we can only see the upper bodies of the two people, and the rest is dark. In this dim, fast, and blurry shot, spectators seem to be peering into a hidden world, igniting their voyeuristic fantasies. This feeling can be described as an unconscious cinematic experience. More importantly, when the audience is watching this scene, the screen is like a mirror, especially the dark part of the screen. The concept of the mirror stage by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan provides a paradigm for explaining this scopophilia. According to Lacan, the mirror stage occurs in infants between six and eighteen months of age when they misrecognize themselves while looking in the mirror. The infant's look in the mirror is a misrecognition because it sees its fragmentary body as a whole and identifies itself with this illusory unity. In the process, the infant assumes a mastery over the body that it does not have, and this self-deception forms the basis for developing the infant's ego [7]. The analogy between Lacan's infant and the cinematic spectator makes this idea attractive for film theory. Psychoanalytic film theorists argue that the cinematic experience perpetuates ideological deception by establishing a mirror relationship for the audience [8]. Despite the superficial similarities between a screen and a mirror, such as the framing of human figures in their surroundings, cinema possesses structures of fascination that are powerful enough to induce a temporary loss of self while concurrently reinforcing the ego. The sensation of forgetting the world, as the ego subsequently perceives it, nostalgically harks back to the presubjective moment of image recognition [9]. The concept of the mirror stage can only be applied to the unconscious viewing state, which is why in this shot of *Wild*, the filmmaker must conceal the presence of the camera (a static shot is used). Once the camera becomes an evident

presence rather than an invisible structural absence, the audience will lose their omnipotent position alongside the camera and become a part of the cinematic event. When this happens, the spectators will realize that the movie is a product, not just a representation of reality.

However, her perseverance is evident in the subsequent shots showing Cheryl organizing her backpack. The large, bulging backpack visually demonstrates her attention to detail as a woman. The abundance of items suggests her desire to fulfill her needs through these possessions, and her insistence on every detail makes it difficult for her to choose these items. Simultaneously, carrying such a heavy burden of her past, which she cannot let go, drains Cheryl's strength yet she cannot abandon it. She made several attempts to lift the backpack, but the shot ended with her pressed to the ground by its weight and struggled to support the table to stand up, until the emergence of a tall and robust figure in sunlight marked her successful departure. Viewing the shots where Cheryl tries to carry the backpack in the room, it's hard not to notice the lines of her leg muscles, a detail that tells the audience she is a woman capable of independent wilderness hiking. In addition, when the audience sees Cheryl's bags and hiking equipment of all sizes in her room, they may think of the first scene in the movie. Cheryl walks until her toenails fall entirely off, and she lifts them and throws them away with her own hands. She accidentally drops the most critical shoe in hiking into the mountain stream. Angry, she goes crazy and throws the other shoe off the cliff, shouting hysterically into the valley. The first scene is Cheryl throwing down her belongings on the hiking trail, and this scene shows her packing various items into her backpack before starting the hike. This comparison highlights the transformation of the female protagonist's soul along the way.

When she boarded the first vehicle of her hiking journey, she reminisced about dancing with her mother in the kitchen as a child. The warm hues of orange evoke a cozy feeling, symbolizing the irrevocable passage of time. But if we examine this scene from the perspective of feminist film analysis, the hidden voyeurism here is enveloped in the beauty of memories. The mother's attire in this section is very eye-catching because the tight-fitting backless dress is not the style that people often wear at home. It is reasonable to suspect that this dress is more suitable for dancing, and later, the plot proves that she did wear this dress to dance and play with her daughter in the kitchen. This detail does not meet the narrative requirements of this plot, as it should be a warm memory of the female protagonist's childhood and has little to do with the revealing attire in the scene. In the first scene of recalling her mother, Cheryl's mother's actions towards her were more like facing an adult male rather than her little daughter. The lighting in this scene is also dim, which can be explained as a vague memory of childhood memories, but it can also be because the camera is creating a scene that can stimulate people's desire to peek. The relationship between watching and being watched in movies is often complex since these characters sometimes could be both the center of the screen for moviegoers and the center of the narrative story for characters in the plot, and this scene is a good example. People outside the screen are watching Cheryl's mother, and in this narrative, she is being watched by the young Cheryl. Therefore, from this perspective, the viewer in the story is a young girl, so the spectators are not standing in a male perspective. Meanwhile, the impact of the environment and cinematic apparatus on scopophilia during movie watching should not be underestimated. For example, the darkness in the audience hall (which also isolates the audience) creates a sharp contrast with the dazzling light and shadow patterns moving on the screen, which helps to create the illusion of solitary voyeurism. In addition, the nudity obsession of cinema audiences is suppressed, as they openly project their suppressed desires onto the performers [9]. But it cannot be denied that, this movie shows the significant achievements and interpretation space in explaining women's independence and constructing self-worth [10].

3. Conclusion

This article analyzes the three sets of shots at the beginning of *Wild* to reveal the apparent to-be-looked-at-ness of female characters even in a feminist road movie released in 2014. It must be admitted that *Wild* is an innovative road movie that weakens the relationship between women and others on the road. In this movie, we can see many changes in the female protagonist, including the initial concerns and the release of shouting in the mountains, all proclaiming the spiritual core of new feminism. The director Jean-Marc Vallée created a three-dimensional and full female image in which Cheryl let go of the heavy mental burden and pain brought by her memories while walking, faced her inner demons, and sought opportunities to regain herself in the increase of physical pain and the weakening of mental pain. She also attempted to rely on hiking to polish her overly empty life. But this movie is still a feminist road movie under a patriarchal structure, which means that although the director chooses to tell the story of women, create strong female characters, and place women in the center of the camera, the pleasure of looking is still preserved. Through the combination of psychoanalytic theory and lens language analysis, the male gaze still breaks through the cloak of self-growth here and is perceived by the audience.

However, the author does not have a negative outlook on the future development of this film or even the genre of feminist road films. From *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* to the success of *Thelma and Louise* and the release of *Wild*, feminist directors have continuously shed gender-based biases in narrative and visual effects. An exceptionally contradictory point is that the male gaze scenes in this movie always appear together with scenes symbolizing female power, which indicates that the filmmakers have a robust feminist intention. However, the act of gazing at female characters has not been eliminated. Women will undoubtedly continue to play the role of the one to be looked at in movies for a considerable period in the future, just as they will still be the second gender in real life. But they have already shaken the monotony of the traditional male gaze with their female gaze.

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