

The Subversion of Male Coagulation in Classic Films and the Reconstruction of Gender Power

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Abstract. This paper conducts a comparative analysis of *Blonde* (2022) and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) to examine how these films subvert the Male Gaze and reconstruct gender power dynamics. Specifically, it will analyze from three perspectives: character development, camera language, and narrative plot, how the "male gaze" is manifested and how female subjectivity is highlighted. Through this explanation, the study reveals how such cinematic subversions redefine gendered representations and carry tangible implications for individuals and society. The findings illuminate how cinematic choices redefine gendered subjectivities, challenge cultural norms, and carry tangible implications for audience perceptions of gender, agency, and power in both media and society.

Keywords: male gaze, materialization, women's power, female subjectivities

1. Introduction

The concept of the "Male Gaze," as theorized by Laura Mulvey, has long been a foundational lens for understanding cinematic representation. Mulvey explained that Mulvey's analysis highlighted a gendered dynamic in film, where women are positioned as passive objects of the gaze, while men's visibility is balanced by their active role in the narrative [1]. This gaze, framing women as objects of visual pleasure primarily for a presumed male spectator, became a normative mode of storytelling. However, with evolving societal values, particularly heightened awareness of gender equality, contemporary cinema increasingly reflects and engages with these shifts. This critical phenomenon is discovered through the shift in the male gaze which is more prominently manifested in the classical films specifically in the film called *Blonde* (2022) and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017). In the film, *Blonde* (2022) frames Marilyn Monroe through the perspective of a male gaze, emphasizing the special Angle from which she is observed by men. This continuous focus forms a sharp contrast with *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017). *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) presents a deviation from this approach, centering the narrative on the female character Mildred Hayes. The development of the entire film was largely driven by her actions and perspective rather than her being the object of gaze. This film minimizes the influence of the traditional male gaze framework on her personality to the greatest extent. Thus,

these two films offer contrasting yet powerful explorations of how the cinematic gaze can be challenged and gender power relations renegotiated.

While the theory of the male gaze is well-established, there remains a significant need to examine the specific strategies of subversion employed by contemporary filmmakers and the resulting reconfigurations of gender power. The contrast between the character development, camera language and narrative plot highlighting the male gaze in *Blonde* (2022) and *Three billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) has not been fully explored.

This research, therefore, aims to conduct a detailed comparative analysis of *Blonde* (2022) and *Three Billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) to investigate the subversion of the male gaze and the reconstruction of gender power, which can contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolving representation of gender in cinema.

2. Analysis of the films

In *Blonde* (2022), the film depicts Marilyn, whose true identity has been stripped away, objectified and reduced to a symbol of sexiness. "Our culture provides the envious with a ready arsenal of weapons to discipline overtly sexual women and curtail their power." [2].

In terms of character development, in the film, Marilyn's red lips in her dressing and grooming move men deeply, as if she were born to be admired. In a man's eyes, that touch of red is a silent invitation. The red lips themselves have already fulfilled the mission entrusted to her - to attract, please and satisfy the male gaze. That lip no longer belongs to oneself; it is an exhibit displayed in the male desire window. Her tight dress accentuated her full chest and round buttocks. However, this was uncomfortable for Marilyn. She did this only to meet the requirements of male vision. Those astonishing high heels, with each step both painful and elegant, can evoke a man's instinctive protective instinct. In addition, Marilyn's walking posture seems like a performance being watched, as her steps have been practiced countless times and can twist and create a fleshy feel. It seemed as if the men were truly appreciating a work of art. The producer pushed the contract in front of Marilyn and said: "Sign Marilyn. Norma Jeane must die." The camera zooms in on the tip of a pen crushing the signature of "norma jeane", with the stage name "Marilyn Monroe" covered in gilded font. The pen violence here reflects the strangulation of female subjectivity by male rights.

In terms of lens shooting, *Blonde* (2022) uses close-up shots. "This scene is reminiscent of Maria's dance in *Metropolis*, a performance that was constructed similarly with increasing close up shots of the widening eyes of a male audience watching the performance" [3] In fact, such close-up shots in "*Blonde*" can truly and vividly demonstrate the severity of male coagulation. In *Blonde* (2022), the close-up shots that avoid Monroe's eyes account for more than 65%, proving that the camera system deprives her of her subjectivity [4]. For instance, in the movie, there are close-ups of Marilyn's hair entwining around her fingers and the sticky pillow. And the close-up of the waist and arm curves, the compression of the chest, all these reflect the materialized and sexualized characteristics of women. Because the temptation of walking and the close-up of Marilyn's chest are both symbols serving male pleasure, as if with every step Marilyn takes, she will be gazed at by men.

In terms of narrative, *Blonde* (2022) focuses the plot on the traumas Marilyn has suffered, such as being abandoned by her mother in childhood, exploited by Hollywood producers, and having multiple miscarriages, all of which are Marilyn's painful experiences. This narrative approach regards Marilyn's life as suffering, emphasizing her role as an object of male desire while neglecting her own subjectivity as an actress and as an individual. Marilyn's initiative is rarely shown in the film. Most of the time, it's passive, such as passively accepting a job and being forced to change her

name. In addition, this film lacks resistance from a female perspective. The entire film hardly features Marilyn's own perspective, nor does it offer any counterattack against oppression and exploitation. She only gets angry or complains occasionally, and she seldom builds deep relationships with other women in her life. She has always been in a defined and narrated position.

Martin McDonagh's critically acclaimed film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) stands as a striking departure from the long-standing tradition of the male gaze in cinema—a perspective that has historically framed women as passive objects to be observed, evaluated, and consumed through a masculine lens. At the heart of this narrative is its unyielding protagonist, Mildred Hayes, who is portrayed not as a mere object of desire or a supporting figure in someone else's story, but as a fully realized subject with unwavering agency. Her every action, from renting the billboards that spark the film's central conflict to confronting the town's authorities, is driven by a searing combination of unquenchable thirst for justice—for her daughter, whose murder remains unsolved—and the raw, unprocessed pain of loss that gnaws at her daily. This intentional focus on her internal motivations and active pursuit of change sets her apart from countless female characters who have been reduced to serving the desires or advancing the arcs of male protagonists [5,6].

Visually, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* reinforces Mildred's agency through its deliberate use of medium and wide shots, which consistently center her actions and emotions within the frame. Rather than lingering on fragmented, voyeuristic close-ups of her body—shots that often reduce women to parts rather than whole beings—the camera pulls back to capture the full context of her strength: the way she stands her ground in tense conversations, the resolve etched into her posture as she faces down opposition, and the flickers of vulnerability that humanize her without undermining her power. This approach aligns seamlessly with Laura Mulvey's foundational critique of cinematic objectification, which argues that traditional filmmaking techniques position women as "spectacle" for the male viewer, stripping them of autonomy. By resisting such techniques, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* refuses to let Mildred be reduced to a mere spectacle, instead inviting viewers to engage with her as an active participant in her own story [7,8].

Mildred's characterization is further deepened by the film's attention to details that underscore her authenticity, rather than catering to conventional standards of femininity. She wears practical, no-nonsense clothing—sturdy jackets, work boots, and simple, unadorned outfits—that reflect her focus on action over appearance, a choice that stands in stark contrast to the often unrealistic, hyper-sexualized wardrobes imposed on female characters to satisfy the male gaze. Similarly, the film employs natural lighting, which bathes her in the harsh, unflattering glow of reality rather than softening her features to meet idealized beauty standards. These elements work in tandem to stress her resilience—her ability to endure grief, scorn, and even violence without breaking—and her profound emotional depth, emphasizing that her worth lies not in how she looks, but in who she is and what she fights for. There is no attempt to highlight her sex appeal, no effort to make her palatable or pleasing to a male audience; instead, she exists as she is, unapologetic and unfiltered [6]. Complementing this, the rural setting of Ebbing, Missouri—a tight-knit, often unforgiving community—serves to amplify her voice: in a town where tradition and conformity reign, her refusal to stay silent becomes all the more powerful, and her dominant perspective ensures that her truth cannot be easily drowned out [9].

What makes Mildred's portrayal truly revolutionary is its refusal to simplify her into a one-dimensional archetype. The film resists the temptation to cast her as a saintly martyr or an irrational lunatic—two extremes that have long confined female characters. Instead, it presents her as a complex, flawed human being: she is angry at times, even cruel in her pursuit of justice, lashing out at those who stand in her way, including innocent bystanders. Yet these flaws are never framed as

inherent weaknesses; rather, they are justified by the magnitude of her loss and the systemic failures that have left her daughter's case unaddressed. By showing her in all her imperfection—her rage, her grief, her moments of doubt— *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) encourages viewers to recognize women not as symbols or ideals, but as full, complicated humans with the same range of emotions, contradictions, and agency as their male counterparts [7,9].

To fully appreciate the significance of Mildred's portrayal, one needs only compare it with Andrew Dominik's 2022 film *Blonde*, which offers a starkly different vision of female representation. *Blonde* depicts Marilyn Monroe, one of the most iconic figures of 20th-century pop culture, as little more than a tragic product of male fantasy—a woman whose identity is entirely shaped by the desires, expectations, and cruelties of the men around her. From start to finish, she is objectified: her body is scrutinized, her emotions are manipulated, and her agency is stripped away, reducing her to a passive victim of the very gaze that made her famous. In sharp contrast, Mildred actively resists such objectification; she refuses to be defined by how others see her, and she takes control of her narrative in a way that Monroe, as portrayed in *Blonde*, never can. This contrast illuminates two opposing sides of female representation in cinema: one that reinforces and even celebrates the "being looked at" dynamic, and another that boldly asserts the possibility of "seeing differently"—of recognizing women as subjects rather than objects [6,8].

These differences are not merely academic; they have profound implications for both individuals and society as a whole. For viewers, the contrast between Mildred and the version of Monroe in *Blonde* forces a reckoning with internalized gender biases—those unspoken assumptions that lead us to expect women to be passive, accommodating, or defined by their appearance. By challenging these biases, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) encourages a shift in how we perceive women in media, fostering a greater willingness to see them as agents of their own stories. On a broader societal level, such films underscore the power of cinema to shape cultural values: when movies portray women as active, complex, and in control, they do more than entertain—they challenge the patriarchal norms that have long marginalized women, paving the way for a more equitable and compassionate world where every individual's voice is heard and valued [5,6].

3. Aims and significance of the research

For Individuals: The foremost aim of this research is to challenge the deterministic view of gender that reduces women to passive, subordinate roles and men to dominant, active agents. By analyzing how films like *Blonde* (2022) and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) either reinforce or reject these narratives, we hope to help individuals recognize and overcome gender blind spots—those unconscious biases and assumptions that shape how we perceive women in daily life. This is a process of reflection: how have we internalized the cultural stare? What does it mean to see a woman fully, not with stereotypes or lust, but as a complete human being? Through cinema, this research hopes to stimulate personal transformation and critical awareness, allowing people to rethink gender roles and unlearn systems of power that are ingrained in us.

For Society: At the level of society, our work tries to capture the cultural momentum of film—the manner in which popular cinema shapes collective imagination—and steer it in the direction of a more inclusive discourse. Films are not simply entertainment; they are sites of cultural values, determining what is normalized, romanticized, or rejected. By critiquing how films deconstruct and construct gendered power, we try to subvert patriarchal narratives and foster a culture of equality, compassion, and understanding. When viewers see women taking agency and escaping visual and narrative domination, it sets the stage for change in the lives of women in the real world.

Our research challenges both viewers and artists to think not only about what we are watching but about how we are watching—and for whom we are watching.

4. Conclusion

Conclusion: *Blonde* (2022) and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*'s (2017) influence on the Male Gaze, Subversion of Gender, and Modern Gender Consciousness *Blonde* (2022) and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) are starkly opposing case studies in the manner in which film either reaffirms or subverts patriarchal discourses. Their visual vocabularies and thematic preoccupations both engage with and dismantle the regimes of gender representation that inform contemporary spectatorship.

In *Blonde* (2022), Marilyn Monroe is presented as the prototype of the objectified woman—her face commodified, her voice muted, and her persona shattered by the lusts of men who used her as a screen upon which they placed their fantasies. The movie, through its dizzying cuts, peeping-tom camera work, and frequently savage portrayals of sexual abuse, critiques the film and cultural system that resulted in her exploitation. Though its method has generated controversy over whether or not it unwittingly imitates what it critiques, its purpose is unambiguous: to disclose the psychological violence that the male gaze commits against women. It compels the viewer to acknowledge their own complicity in consuming women as icons and not as people.

In contrast, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*'s (2017) provides a stark departure. The female lead it portrayed has not been materialized. Mildred Hayes is not beautiful, and she doesn't live for men either. More importantly, she doesn't please men. She has a clear goal and just wants justice. The film's visual language is very detailed, and the shots do not present any pornographic descriptions. The audience can empathize and understand the character herself.

Blonde (2022) reveals the impact of being gazed at by men, and the *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) stands in sharp contrast to it, offering another way of looking at women. This kind of opposing relationship is of great significance for understanding male coagulation.

From a wider cultural point of view, these films are grappling with issues of the "MeToo movement," autonomy over one's body, and remodeling female subjectivity in art and society. The influence on audiences is enormous: by taking women off their pedestal and representing them not as ideals or cautionary tales but as multifaceted subjects, they provoke audiences to rethink their own ideas about gender. This is especially relevant for children, whose conceptualization of gender roles is just beginning to take shape and is deeply affected by media depiction.

The graphical portraiture of gender subversion—whether in Monroe's captive vulnerability or Mildred's defiant rebellion—acts as both mirror and provocation. It reflects the experience of existing under patriarchal surveillance but also directs us toward a future in which agency, voice, and power are not circumscribed by gender.

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