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Gaze, Boundary, and Dehistoricization: Mechanisms of Gender Power in Film Review Discourse

Ran Quan

Utrecht university, Utrecht, the Netherlands
quanran742@gmail.com

Abstract. This study employs Bourdieu's theory of cultural production and Gieryn's theory of boundary-work as its analytical framework, integrating LDA topic modelling with Critical Discourse Analyse (CDA) to systematically examine how film review systems consistently produce and reproduce gender power structures at the discursive level, drawing on a corpus of 1,531 film review articles from the authoritative review platform (a website) RogerEbert.com. This study concludes three core mechanisms: first, with the dual operation of the "affirmative gaze" and "counter-gaze," women remain positioned as objects to be watched and defined even within ostensibly progressive discourse; second, a double standard of dehistoricization systematically obscures women's efforts and contributions in film history, instead, it simultaneously and continuously "enchants" male creators; third, the categorical boundary between "women's films" and "mainstream films" naturalizes male experience as the universal standard, degrading "women's films" to a specialized category below "mainstream films." These mechanisms demonstrate that film review discourse functions not only as a site of aesthetic criticism but as an important mechanism for constructing gender boundaries within the industry, continually reinforcing existing gender power structures within the field of cultural production.

Keywords: Gender Discourse, Male Gaze, Boundary Work, Dehistoricization

1. Introduction

Based on the 2023 Academy Awards sweep by Everything Everywhere All at Once, its core creative team including directors Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, and star Michelle Yeoh, achieved success regarded as a milestone breakthrough for Asian and female representation in Hollywood. However, a fact stands in stark contrast: among that year's ten Best Picture nominees, only two were directed by women. This contradiction precisely reveals the central paradox of the contemporary film industry: women's achievements are frequently celebrated as "exceptional" individual and specific cases, while their systemic marginalization within the whole industry structure is perceived for granted.

Existing research has deeply analysed this inequality along two dimensions: first, on screen, female characters are often trapped in stereotypes and the framework of the "male gaze"; second, behind the scenes, women face severe career and resource barriers in core positions of power such as directing and producing. However, the role of gender discourse in the film industry has been

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relatively ignored in analyses of both textual content and industrial structure. How films are evaluated, who is defined as an "author," and who is deemed "professional"—these standards formed by authoritative discourses such as film critics and festivals, invisibly becoming boundaries that define creative status and allocate symbolic capital.

It is precisely these seemingly neutral artistic discourses that conduct crucial symbolic boundary-work, universalizing creative modes, narrative themes, and professional temperaments historically related to men into industry standards and artistic authority, unconsciously transforming structural gender inequality into the natural outcome of individual cases or market choices.

To validate this argument, this study integrates Bourdieu's field theory with Gieryn's concept of boundary-work, taking the authoritative film review website RogerEbert.com as a case study, and applies a method of combining LDA topic modeling and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The aim is to systematically investigate how gender boundaries are continuously produced and reproduced in film production practices, providing a critical foundation for building a more reflexive and inclusive film culture.

2. Literature review

Gender studies on film creation have increasingly attracted widespread attention in recent years. Current research on women in the film industry is primarily concentrated in four areas.

First, the symbolic representation about the objectification and commodification of women in film content reveals gender stereotypes, and this phenomenon constitutes a major part of the analysis of women in film. Molina Garcia et al. examined images of women as producible commodities in science fiction films, such as female robots, clones, and AI [1]. This research found that these characters are often designed to satisfy male sexual fantasies, perpetuating the concept of the "male gaze" proposed by Laura Mulvey [2]. Meanwhile, Lapan and Sadler conducted a deep investigation into American movies, finding that although Black women are one of the most significant groups in the tourism market, they are frequently sexualized and constrained on the screen by the film industry, particularly with the feature of mobility.

Second, "resistance" to domestic violence and gender trauma is produces visibly at the level of content [3]. For example, Lameborshi analysed how post-war Kosovar women's cinema challenges deeply entrenched patriarchal norms by presenting domestic violence and gender trauma, transforming film into a place where women contest social rights [4].

Third, women's labour in the film production process has been ignored for a long time. McGuirl conducts archaeological research on overlooked aspects of filmmaking, such as script annotations and shooting notes, revealing how women's labour has been persistently neglected in film history. These materials confirm women's crucial roles throughout the entire filmmaking process [5].

Finally, systemic occupational gender segregation persists within the film industry. Among Hollywood directing positions, women and directors from minority backgrounds have consistently faced systemic bias in accessing resources such as investment, distribution scale, and marketing promotion. Particularly, Videla-Rodriguez et al., in their study of the Spanish film market from 2002 to 2018, found that although women's participation in executive production and creative roles rose notably even after entering the twenty-first century, growth at the core decision-making level remained slow [6].

By combining the theory of cultural production with boundary-work theory, this study understands film cultural production as a power process constituted by structural resource allocation and everyday practice together. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of cultural production, film is no longer seen merely as artistic creation or market behaviour, but as a competitive process within a

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cultural field, in which different forms of capital (such as economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital) and habitus (not clear rules, but ways of thinking gradually and potentially shaped by long-accepted information) determine who can be recognized as a "legitimate creator." At the same time, Gieryn's theory of "boundary-work" offers an important perspective for understanding how these structural inequalities are continuously constructed within concrete cultural production practices. This theory conceives of boundaries as a social process continuously constructed and negotiated through discourse and practice, which means actors delineate symbolic boundaries between the "inside" and the "outside" by conferring legitimacy, authority, and professionalism on objects [7]. In the context of this paper, film review is an important arena for constructing this boundary: through the criticism of films and practitioners, film review not only participates in the production of cultural value but also differentiates practitioners within specific gender narrative frameworks, continually reinforcing the existing evaluative standards and power structures in the film industry.

The theory of cultural production can reveal how gender shapes the pathways through which cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital are accumulated, making masculine traits, established career trajectories, and "orthodox styles" more easily convert to advantages within the field of film production. Austin proposes that in film and media studies, Bourdieu's concepts of the field of cultural production, forms of capital, and field interaction can be used to analyse power relations between creative subjects and institutions, emphasizing how conditions of production shape the distribution of meaning and value in media cultural products. Boundary-work theory can explain how such structural differences become naturalized in specific working contexts through the everyday delineation of "professionalism," "creative authority," and the "qualified creator" [8]. Riegert applies boundary-work theory to the field of journalism and media, analysing how journalism and media practitioners negotiate professional status, authoritative discourse, and practical boundaries across blurred divides (such as those between news and entertainment, or independent creation and commercial content) [9].

3. Data source

This paper selects the film review platform "RogerEbert.com" as its primary data source. The site takes its name from Roger Ebert, who is one of America's most famous film critics, regarded as an authority in film criticism. RogerEbert.com not only collects Roger Ebert's own reviews and articles of many other film critics, but also provides a platform for film industry news, feature articles, and curated film lists. The website is a high-quality, authoritative film review platform that is suitable both for casual film enthusiasts and for academic research on film review.

4. Research method

Through RogerEbert.com, this paper accessed 1,531 film review articles as the corpus for analysis. Topic modelling (Latent Dirichlet Allocation, LDA) is primarily used to deal with the difficulty of manually grasping latent semantic structures within large-scale text through systematic reading (Mohr and Bogdanov, 2013) [10]. This paper first applies LDA to examine the latent thematic information from the document collection, extracting six sets of topic words and calculating the distribution probability of each topic group to obtain an overall understanding of the discursive distribution across these film review articles.

After completing the LDA topic modelling, this paper further cleaned and filtered the six sets of topic words, removing high-frequency terms that were semantically ambiguous or of low analytical

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value and retaining only keywords with clear directional relevance to increase the effectiveness of following text retrieval and analysis. Subsequently, this paper conducted searches for related articles on RogerEbert.com based on the filtered keywords, using the retrieved texts as the source material for further CDA analysis. During the retrieval process, it was found that the film review texts corresponding to certain topic-word groups showed relatively weak associations with gender-related issues. To ensure that the textual data could adequately answer this paper's research question about female film producers, gender-qualifying terms such as "women" or "female" were added into the search process for these topic-word groups to further restrict the search results, obtaining review texts specifically related to women. This strategy maintained topical relevance while enhancing the corpus's analytical focus in the gender dimension.

Table 1. After completing the LDA topic modelling, six sets of keywords with clear targeting that were cleaned and filtered

SET 1	SET 2	SET 3	SET 4	SET 5	SET 6	SET 1
Script	Women	Music	Role	War	Book	Script
Scenes	She	Song	Family	Community	Show	Scenes
Audience	Woman	Songs	Kids	Stories	Series	Audience
Camera	Girl	Art	Father	Country	Televisions	Camera
Comedy	Cinema	Voice	Mother	History	Hollywood	Comedy
Experience	Filmmakers	Show	Parents	System	Episode	Experience
Action	Film festival	project	Children	Documentary	Interview	Action
Actors	Love		mom	School	Career	Actors
He	Relationship		Dad	Audience	Money	He
Actor	Experience		Home	Conversation	Business	Actor
Man	Stories		Son			Man
Guy	Family		School			Guy
	Mother		Friends			
	Body					

On this basis, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is further used to conduct an in-depth analysis of the six sets of key topic words groups revealed by LDA. CDA regards discourse as a form of social practice, emphasizing the role of language in the construction of power relations and ideology [11]. Following Fairclough's three-dimensional analytical framework, this paper conducts analysis across the textual, discursive practice, and social practice levels [12]. Specifically, for each of the six topic-word groups, keyword searches were conducted on this website, and relevant film reviews were selected article by article according to the platform's default ranking results, with 7 to 10 articles related to women's cinema or female film producers ultimately selected as samples for each group (irrelevant content was removed sequentially and subsequent results will be supplemented). In this corpus, particular attention was paid to how film reviews characterize female film producers, the long-standing evaluative logic inherent to the whole film industry, and the underlying power structures. Through a pathway moving from quantitative identification to qualitative analysis, this study aims to increase both the systematicity and representativeness of the analysis, while also more

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deeply revealing the specific mechanisms underlying the structural barriers currently faced by female filmmakers.

5. The coexistence of the affirmative gaze and the counter-gaze

In film review discourse, the "male gaze" is not confined merely to the visual level but extends to a way of criticism and meaning production [2]. The film review texts indicated here not only women as objects to be watched, to an affirmative "gaze," but also produce a seemingly progressive yet equally constraining "counter-gaze." Within the existing theoretical framework of the "male gaze" in which previous research has predominantly focused on how women are visually designed and represented as objects of desire, this study further finds that, in film review discourse, even when direct sexualization or objectification is absent, women are still positioned as incapable of independently leading a narrative, and this new situation of "being watched" is redefined as a form of "positive" or "progressive" evaluation.

The "affirmative gaze" is understood as the direct visual scrutiny of women. For example, film reviews frequently comment the physical appearance of female practitioners and female characters before assessing their professional abilities. Such statements, even when ostensibly affirming women, put them in a state of being watched and evaluated; by contrast, criticism of male practitioners and male characters almost never mention appearance-based reviews, instead directly affirming their subjective value and personal abilities. In this process, women do not gain any subjectivity which is equal to that of men but are instead shaped as "objects worth being watched" or "sexual objects in service of men."

"Counter-gaze" also widely exists in the film review texts. This gaze is difficult to detect directly, existing instead in an extremely concealed form in discursive expression. This type of gaze tends to appear in films addressing "women's issues," where women's personal experiences remain attached to male characters. Unlike the "affirmative gaze," in which women are directly regarded as belongings to men, in the "counter-gaze," women's awakening self-consciousness is described to the hunting for male characters, or a woman's own value is expressed through a narrative of self-sacrifice for benefiting others. For instance, in certain films, a woman's break from her old life is marked by being sharply demarcated from a "bad man," or a woman's greatness is depicted someone who sacrifices everything for her children. Consequently, this counter-gaze does not genuinely dismantle the existing relations of looking; rather, it reshapes the boundaries of women's expression in an alternative discursive framework, making it difficult for women to become "unmarked creators or characters."

6. The double standard of dehistoricization

A remarkable mechanism of dehistoricization operates in film review discourse, manifesting in the form of a "double standard" applied to male and female creators respectively.

First, women's pioneering contributions to film history are frequently displaced or reattributed to men. For example, women's critical labour in production processes such as editing and script development is marginalized, while men are positioned at the core of creative authorship; alternatively, the broader discursive system gives less attention to female practitioners' career tracks, technical competencies, or creative methods, focusing instead more on their gender identity or personal experiences. This narrative practice not only denies historical accuracy but also redistributes cultural capital and prestige at the symbolic level, making it difficult for female

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creators to be integrated in the mainstream narrative of "film history," producing the systematic and long-term disempowerment of women in the film industry.

Second, the film industry's criticism system adds an "enchanting" effect upon male practitioners of a certain stature. Certain film reviews, in an effort to embellish the image of male creators, go so far as to conceal their problematic pasts and downplay their exploitation of women. In doing so, these reviews shift the framing of the issue: what was originally "harm upon women" is transferred to "creative talent too significant to overlook." This rhetorical manoeuvre not only hide the inequalities in gender power relations but also implicitly reaffirms a value proposition: that a male creator's artistic achievements can, to some extent, compensate his moral failings. Conversely, women's moral shortcomings tend to be amplified, unable to be hedged against by talent or achievement.

7. The boundaries of publicness: the debate between women's cinema and mainstream cinema

In film review discourse, "popular cinema" or "mainstream cinema" is typically described as work that possesses universal appeal, commercial value, and cultural representativeness. However, this study finds that this "universality" is in fact constructed on the premise of male experience. Films by male directors, regardless of subject matter (war, family, coming-of-age, or otherwise), tend to be classified as universal significance by default, while films produced by female directors are more easily categorized as "women's cinema" or "issue films." By contrast, "grand-themed" films led by women and "micro-themed" films led by men are exceedingly rare. This classificatory mechanism effectively constitutes a symbolic boundary: mainstream cinema represents the universalization of male experience, while women's cinema is treated as a localized observation of a particular group's experience. Furthermore, "men's cinema" itself is not designated as a category at all; rather, it is "unmarked", functioning as the default standard in the criticism system [7]. This asymmetrical logic of naming inherently places women's creative work to a subordinate position, making it more likely to stay in specific thematic categories and less able to enter the space of "mainstream" creation. This classificatory division shapes not only how audiences receive films but also directly affects the allocation of resources. Even female directors with successful work continue to struggle to make sure about getting mainstream investment and distribution resources, while male directors more easily gain access to high-budget projects.

Theoretically, this phenomenon can be further understood through Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere: "publicness" has never been neutral but has historically been dominated and defined by particular groups [13]. In the field of film, male labour has been seen for a long time and mutually accepted, acquiring "reality" and "significance," such that male experience becomes naturalized as "public experience." Oppositely, women and women's experience, which are excluded from this system, are regarded as "private," "particular," and "secondary" [14].

The division between "women's cinema" and "mainstream cinema" is not based on content itself, instead, it is a classificatory outcome determined by power structures. Therefore, the boundaries of "publicness" constitute not only a discursive matter but an institutional one.

8. Conclusion

This paper draws on the theory of cultural production and boundary-work theory, combining topic modelling (LDA) with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), taking film review texts from RogerEbert.com as its object of study, to systematically study how gender inequality in film criticism systems is continuously produced and reproduced at the discursive level. The study finds

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that gender power is not represented solely through ostensible discrimination or exclusion but is embedded more deeply and invisibly in criticism systems that appear neutral, professional, or even "progressive": (1) In the dual structure of the "affirmative gaze" and the "counter-gaze," women remain consistently positioned as objects to be watched and defined. The affirmative gaze reinforces women's visible objecthood through complimentary and positive discourse yet fails to confer genuine subjectivity on them; the counter-gaze, while ostensibly breaking from traditional male-centred narratives, tends to re-frame women's experience still in the expression of "gender issues," such that the construction of female characters remains struggled to enter into independent narrative. This indicated that the gaze has not disappeared but persists in the criticism system in more concealed forms. (2) The mechanism of "dehistoricization" in film review discourse further aggravates gender inequality through a double standard. On one hand, women's labour and contributions in film history are systematically ignored or transferred, making it difficult for them to be integrated into the mainstream narrative; on the other hand, male creators are continuously constructed as absolute artistic subjects through a process of "enchantment," with their negative conduct rationalized or downplayed. This selective extraction of history redistributes authority and legitimacy at the symbolic level. (3) In the division between "women's cinema" and "mainstream cinema," this paper reveals the gendered essence of the boundaries of publicness. In fact, the "universality" of "mainstream cinema" is build based on the default normalization of male experience, while women's creative work is persistently marked as an expression of the "particular" and the "issue-based," excluded from the public sphere in any genuine sense. This finding indicates that the publicness of cinema is not neutral, but rather a constructed outcome shaped by discourse and institutional forces together. This paper not only extends the explanatory range of the traditional "male gaze" theory but also provides a new analytical dimension for understanding the production and reproduction of film culture.

However, this paper has certain limitations. First, the research data primarily sources from a single film review platform; while it is authoritative, this source may not fully represent the broader criticism system. Future research could extend the range to different cultural communities or incorporate data from additional platforms to strengthen the validity of the findings. Second, this paper relies primarily on textual analysis and does not go deeply into other modes of expression such as image and audio. Subsequent research could incorporate interviews or visual/media studies to further examine the structural dynamics behind the discourse.

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