

The Male Gaze and Its Impact on Women's Public Living Space

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Abstract: Under the gaze of men, the motive of objectifying the opposite sex to please the same sex is bound to cause derogation to women. Through the shaping of female images by media or literature, they are sexualized, objectified and alienated, and integrated into the society of male values as an alien. When the general trend of society excludes women and citizens lack social identity for women, women will be marginalized by society. This gaze is known as the male gaze, defined as interpreting women from a male perspective and objectifying them to please the same sex. When the criteria for evaluating female bodies depend on a male-guided aesthetic, it creates the illusion of male “criticism power” over female strangers.

Keywords: male gaze, materialization, female image

1. Introduction

With social development and the progress of ideas, the laws of various countries have eliminated a large number of old customs inherited from the past that oppressed women. In line with the advancement of the times, women have gained the right to employment, education, vote, speech and freedom of marriage. Yet in modern society, women's public living space is still squeezed covertly. In an open social environment, women still encounter the gaze of the opposite sex, or the stare.

This gaze is known as the male gaze, defined as interpreting women from a male perspective and objectifying them to please the same sex. The male gaze has its roots in sexual fantasies about the opposite sex, and it originates from male's “sexual gaze” on female. When the criteria for evaluating female bodies depend on a male-guided aesthetic, it creates the illusion that men have “critical authority” over female strangers. When one understands how and why women's public living spaces are affected by the male gaze, one can create a freer and more equal living environment for women and get rid of the traditional heterosexual scrutiny.

2. Media Alienation of Female Image

The main way in which the male gaze uses to alienate and objectify female images is through literature and media. Among them, a large number of films and television works have alienated women as “a different gender from men”. In film and television works with predominantly male characters, women are alienated as simple-minded, capricious, and emotional plane figures. They

are usually characterized by a lack of understanding of the big picture, an inability to comprehend “rational male thinking”, and being obstacles for the hero to achieve his mission.

For example, Thor, American comic strip superhero Thor transitioned to the big screen with the premiere of the film Thor in 2011, directed by Kenneth Branagh [1]. This movie tells the story of a series of superheroes about Thor, who was banished to the earth by his father and deprived of his power, to prove himself worthy of his power and throne. When Thor returns to Asgard to save the universe, his girlfriend Jane Foster is devastated and persuades Thor to stay on Earth for her. In the same situation, the male character chooses to fulfill his responsibility, while the female character puts her personal love above anything else. This contrast highlights the difference in thinking patterns between male and female characters in screen images and results in a gender gap. The more rational image of men is implied in the film and television works. The film grossed \$449,326,618 worldwide [2]. It has an unusual social impact, flattening female characters and promoting the idea that women are “more emotional” than men. Unconsciously, it contributes to the construction of stereotypes about women.

However, the use of film and social media to promote men’s superior social status in society, objectifying women as lacking individuality, and labeling them with a simple conceptualization may affect the physical and mental development of women, especially adolescent women. This phenomenon highlights the differences and differences between men and women, and does not analyze women in the same way as men. Instead, it defines women as different people who do not have male thinking patterns, and describes them as different images integrated into the society guided by masculinity, thus objectifying women. It may also impact female self-recognition and identity. On Tiktok, there is a hashtag #Girlmimicking. The tag features people of all nationalities mimicking the antics that women typically perform, such as running with their arms between their legs or posing sexualized poses. Most of the photographers are men. The situation reflects the male gaze, the male perspective with its examination of the opposite sex, and alienation. Some of them generalize and objectify the opposite sex, making fun of women by flaunting the differences between men and women with a sense of male supremacy.

3. Women Objectify Themselves in a Consumerist Society

Women’s living space is established in the society dominated by masculism and consumerism. When their appearance has consumption value, women’s appearance will be the object of consumption. For example, when a car selling company advertises a new sedan, it will hire sexy young models to attract and attract customers near the car samples. Male appreciation serves as a measure of women’s self-worth. Some women are happy to be stared at, and even think that the approval of the opposite sex is their way to self-worth, and even criticize themselves to cater to men. There is a certain correlation between women’s emphasis on self-appearance and men’s aesthetics, and it will affect women’s self-cognition to a certain extent.

In a male-dominated society, women who conform to male aesthetics are more likely to be happy and successful as long as they have superior appearance and figure, or have the ability to please the opposite sex. The male gaze inherently limits women’s chances of success. Because of the core contempt for women in their gaze, women’s success is actually under the gaze and “supervision” of men. When some companies interview female employees, they often ask questions about whether they can drink alcohol or socialize with leaders, which has been the standard for hiring female employees. When companies measure the value of female employees based on their physical appearance, and women’s physical appearance is linked to salary and promotion, their “monetary value” will be equated with “success” in the male-dominated workplace, and women will be forced to cater to the male gaze in pursuit of improving their quality of life.

In fact, this happiness is ultimately given by men. To please men is to please society [2]. Under the social trend that women can gain favor and gain benefits by catering to men's appearance or sexual characteristics, the social phenomenon of female identity objectification is inevitable. When women can gain equivalent benefits from being stared at, some women will be imperceptibly trapped in the logic of self-objectification and self-commercialization under the propaganda implication of sexualized female identity, and voluntarily or involuntarily cater to male aesthetic standards. For example, anchor, as a modern high-paying profession with low threshold, has quickly gained the favor of some women who yearn for high salaries. There was once a Tiktok celebrity who interviewed elementary school students on the street for a dream job, and hosting turned out to be the most popular job for young girls. Female anchors get a lot of attention online and are rewarded with money in the form of talent shows.

Among the users of live broadcast software, the number of male users is far greater than that of female users. In the case that most of its audience groups are of the opposite sex, being watched, being imagined and being measured by money are the stares female anchors have to experience. The high salary the profession gets from viewers' tips, as well as the large number of fans' likes and followers, creates the anchor's sense of identity and satisfies the vanity of craving to be watched. In favorable circumstances, female anchors show a compromise attitude in front of the male gaze, voluntarily as a "commodity" to be consumed. On the other hand, this behavior also increases the prejudice against women in society and causes women to be stigmatized.

4. Squeezing the Rights of Women

Under the gaze of men, the motive of objectifying the opposite sex to please the same sex is bound to cause derogation to women. Through the shaping of female images by media or literature, they are sexualized, objectified and alienated, and integrated into the society of male values as an alien. When the general trend of society excludes women and citizens lack social identity for women, women will be marginalized by society.

Men are self-centered and gaze from a self-superior male perspective, repeatedly reinforcing stereotypes of women's traditional identities in media, literature, the workplace and other media. In literature, women are often independent individuals, becoming gentle "interpretive flowers" who can offer milk and sexual value unconditionally in the leisure time of male characters. Except for the sexual fantasy and gaze of the opposite sex by the male creators, it is all a reflection of the stereotype that women are more suitable to take care of the family in the male values.

Moreover, the stereotypes that are so deeply ingrained in men's perceptions, as a measure of "good women," will shift from the fantasy of fictional works to the gaze of real women. When this fantasy is entrenched enough, the effects of objectification and segregation of female identity are projected onto reality. The demands made on the female image from a male perspective will imply that women define themselves in this way to fit into that society and culture. For example, in the classical works left by the feudal society, under the background of the time, the ancients propagated the image of "chaste and fierce woman" in their works in large numbers, and considered it a necessary virtue for women, and its deep-rooted influence on female chastity has continued to this day.

To this day, female fashion bloggers who share sexy outfits across platforms are often subjected to male stares. If his clothes are considered "rebellious" and not of "feminine virtue" by men, some men will take it for granted that they are qualified to "teach" and "educate" strange individuals. "I would not allow my future wife to dress like this" is a common comment from middle-aged men in the comments section of women's fashion bloggers. When staring at the opposite sex becomes the norm for men, it gives them the illusion that they have physical control over strangers. When men

have the right of distribution and intervention over women, it will lead to the unequal status of men and women, thus further squeezing women's existing rights such as the right to dress freely.

If being male means being born superior to others and having the privilege to interfere with other citizens, then women's social status is no worse than that of second-class citizens. The male gaze is reflected in the reality as the male perspective as the standard to measure women, and shapes the individual women in line with their male aesthetic, and interferes with women's private power.

5. Media Reconstruction of Female Image and Self-reflection

Margaret Atwood once said, "You are a woman, but inside there is a man looking at a woman. You are your own voyeur." The narrow concept left by the feudal society from ancient times to today makes the society criticize women from a male-dominated perspective, leading to the alienation, sexualization and stereotyping of female identity for a long time. In order to adapt to this social phenomenon, women constantly make compromises, concessions and self-comfort, and show understanding to the gaze of the opposite sex. The formation of female stereotypes in the media is not only the repression of the patriarchal culture, but also the compromise of women themselves [3].

Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex* that "the gaze is a power of domination and control" [4]. Under the feudal ideology and the media's propaganda of female external beauty stereotype, the unitary female image deeply permeates and takes root in the social concept, making women as the object of the "second sex" to be stared at exist in the society dominated by male values. The female image constantly strengthened and propagated by the mass media by the male aesthetic is guiding women to ask for their own aesthetic in the patriarchal society.

Traditional ideas have great influence on social groups and cannot be easily eliminated. Women's blind adherence to male gaze in order to adapt to the environment, and their neglect of their individual identity in order to conform to social expectations, encourage male gaze and make it impossible to eradicate. Under the invisible cultural pressure, while constantly adapting to the social trend, it is difficult for women to truly escape from the positioning of mass media and rights organizations [4]. Under the social values dominated by consumerism, women, as individuals who have to adapt to the patriarchal society, are easy to lose their self-recognition and deny their self-value in the suggestion of the media. Women need to get rid of the bondage of male consciousness, reshape the aesthetic system, improve their understanding of the value of the body, and avoid becoming the cognition of stimulating and satisfying the desires of consumers [5].

Furthermore, women need to improve their ability to reflect on their identity and maintain their sensitivity to gender issues. If women want to get rid of the male gaze in a real sense, constantly actively reflect on themselves and change themselves, and do not compromise the sexual gaze of the opposite sex, so as to win more right to speak and dress freely for themselves, instead of passively waiting and expecting the day when men can abandon the traditional ideas and obey the female thinking.

In the second aspect, in addition to resisting the feudal concept of the patriarchal society by means of female introspection and sensitivity to gender issues, another core reason for male gaze lies in the propaganda of the single image of women by the mass media. Therefore, the mass media to reshape the image of women is one of the core solutions. The purpose of this solution is to correct the stereotypical image of women being alienated and demonized, reflect on the problem of male gaze and female compromise, and solve the problem that women are gradually assimilated voluntarily or involuntarily and get used to being stared at in the society of male values. One of its misunderstandings that has a large number of supporters is to create the "female gaze" corresponding to the male gaze. The female gaze is defined as objectifying men from the perspective of women to please the female audience, sexualizing and stereotyping men.

The reason why the female gaze has won the support of some feminists is that some feminists believe that it is a way for women to stare at men, so as to retaliate and “revenge” against the male gaze. They believe that the purpose of this behavior is to show men the harm of male gaze to women through the exchange of positions from the male perspective, so as to arouse the resonance of some men. As a solution, however, it is more like an emotional venting of men than a real solution. As a single negative act with certain contempt or hatred towards a certain group, staring is to support this form of hatred, no matter from the standpoint of either gender.

Therefore, the female gaze is not desirable and is not a good solution to the male gaze. On the contrary, only by promoting healthy female images and building normal gender relations can men effectively eliminate their unilateral sexualization and sexual gaze towards women, and make them recognize the diversified female images and respect the independence and autonomy of women as individuals.

Disney, one of the companies that has made a lot of changes to the way women are portrayed in the past in recent years, has made a lot of positive films for children this year. This undoubtedly plays a positive role in shaping the youth’s gender consciousness on the road. In the first generation of Disney princess movies, *Cinderella* (1950), in this classic story, a beautiful girl is forced to work as a free babysitter by her bullying stepmother and jealous stepsisters [6]. It shows Cinderella changing her life through marriage. In *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Aurora waits for a kiss of true love from a strange man to save her. In the *Little Mermaid* released in 1989, Disney created a new princess image. Ariel is a rebellious and adventurous character who pursues her yearning for land and saves the prince. Ariel’s new image symbolizes the change of the company’s image of women in traditional princess films, overturning the audience’s previous impression of the princess as innocent, kind and waiting to be saved. With the success of “*The Little Mermaid*,” Disney has continued to release princess movies that fulfill their own ideals and yearn for freedom. The appearance of the princess also changed from the white female characters with big eyes, white skin, princess dress and sexy figure at the beginning to the colored princess with different and varied facial features, comfortable clothes and even suitable for combat clothing, and strong or healthy body.

Compared with the images of the first generation of princesses, the second generation of princess films pursue the theme of freedom and self, which is a revision of the female image on screen to show the concept of modern women. The external beauty of women is the expression of their gender characteristics. The public should understand and appreciate it, but it should also improve the aesthetic taste and appreciate the multi-faceted images of modern women who are independent, confident and actively participating in social life from an objective and fair perspective [7]. Promoting the female perspective, breaking the shackles of gender roles, challenging the narrow aesthetic and prejudice of female characters on screen, thus weakening and diminishing the deep-rooted prejudice of male gaze, can effectively reduce female stigmatization and correct the female image distorted by male aesthetic.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, the male gaze, as the dross left by the deep-rooted notions of male respect from ancient times, is misdirected by the mass media and squeezes the space for female survival through the means of sexualizing the opposite sex. Women need to maintain the sensitivity to gender issues and the recognition of self-consciousness, so as to correctly and comprehensively affirm their own self-value as an independent individual, and strive for more natural rights for themselves. The publicity of positive female images by modern media and the correction of narrow and deformed aesthetic towards women is also a way to help women get rid of the identity of sexual fantasy objects being stared at and to help teenagers establish self-gender cognition.

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