

MALE GAZE AND FEMINIST FILM: SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN *SPRING BREAKERS*

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Abstract: Laura Mulvey's 5 decade old polemic essay *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema* had long been the cornerstone of feminist film theory. Using Freud's theory of scopophilia she posited that the passive, helpless and usually eroticized female characters on screen only exist to drive the male characters to act, furthering the narrative and pleasing the male spectators. Her stance on the matter of the inescapable male gaze only persisted with the bibliography that followed. But what if a film's self-reflexively uses the heavily eroticized but active characters to consciously exploit the male gaze and ultimately assert their personal power? Investigating Harmony Korine's controversial 2012 film *Spring Breakers* through a third wave feminism lens and challenging Mulvey's paradigm on the exclusively sadistic gaze, this study aims to explore the nuances of female agency and question the feasibility of a film simultaneously having strong and active female characters and appealing to the male gaze.

Keywords: Feminist Film Theory, Male Gaze, *Spring Breakers*, Sadism/Masochism, Female Agency.

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Introduction

Netflix currently faces a 5 million dollar lawsuit for defamation of character because of its last episode of *Queen's Gambit*. The fictional character of Nona Gaprindashvili, the first woman grandmaster whom the film is about, competes in a commentated chess tournament in Moscow. "The only unusual thing about her, really, is her sex, and even that's not unique in Russia," said the announcer, followed by "There's Nona Gaprindashvili, but she's the female world champion and has never faced men." Factually wrong (she won against many male champions up until then) and connoting sexism, the grandmaster remembered her humiliating experiences of climbing to the top of the already male dominated chess world. "It took a year of fighting to get accepted. Whenever they saw me as a small, short, young girl, they would tell me to get in line—to play next time, but not now. But I always asserted my place". (Stevens, 2021) There is a certain dissonance in how the chess opponents treated Gaprindashvili and how gentlemanly they were in her stylized version in the series. Despite depicting a female fighting the 50s and 60s institutionalized patriarchal norm through meritocracy, it rarely ceases to render the structural inequalities that prevailed in that era which ultimately gave rise to second wave feminism. For the last few decades, Hollywood has represented strong and active female characters as a way to combat gender biases and subsequently placed themselves on "the right side of history". While a step forward towards the empowerment of feminine display, the case of Gaprindashvili presents the contradictory nature of the little woman against the all-victorious men in a patriarchal society, merely transforming the woman prodigy into just prodigy. As Henry Jenkins writes: "Harmon (Gaprindashvili's character) can be rude, condescending, and selfish, and the men in her life will always return to support her. Because she's a Cumberbatch, aka an

antisocial genius, and that is the height of male-penned superiority.” (2021) Albeit the series popularity (62 million households watched it in the first 28 days) and the consequent rise in female players on the popular website chess.com (about 15% more), the situation sparks a 5-decade old controversy about the representation of women in the audio-visual realm and the prospect of escaping the erroneous stereotypes and subverting the male gaze.

In 1975, Laura Mulvey’s polemic essay *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema* established a psychoanalytical framework for feminist film theory based upon the juxtaposition of Freud’s concept of scopophilia (the pleasure of looking) and Lacan’s mirror stage (the idealization of one’s ego), amassing vast critiques and praises. Analyzing the active male/passive female dichotomy in classical Hollywood cinema, Mulvey argued that spectators identify with the active male protagonist and desire the passive female-turned-object. Subsequently, female spectators either adopt transvestite clothing and assume the sadistic male point-of-view or relate masochistically to the objectified woman. Mulvey’s concept was at the forefront of a demand of an inclusive avant-garde cinema, which she herself had dwelled into, directing several feminist films. However, her bibliography that followed on the stance were only a revision of the same all-powerful male gaze and never new modes of spectatorship or representation of women. ”So I had no interest in modifying the argument, it had to be rigorous, to attack as it were. Clearly I think, in retrospect from a more nuanced perspective, about the inescapability of the male gaze.” (Mulvey in Sassatelli, 2011, p. 128).

Wanting to highlight the validity of (still!) the problematic portrayal of women in contemporary media, my essay will comprise of an analysis of Harmony Korine’s 2012 film *Spring Breakers* based on the concept of the male gaze and interpreting it through a third-wave feminism lens. Because of its divide in critiques either judging it for its superficial and hyper-sexualized depiction of teenage girls – “a terrible movie, it reinforces rape culture” (Long, 2013) – or praising it as an unlikely “feminist manifesto” (Richardson, 2013), the study aims to investigate the nuances of the objectifying gaze and question the “right model” of female agency.

Methodology

The methodology employed consists of defining and comparing the ideologies and historical contexts from which both second and third-wave feminism ensued, in order to decipher the divide in criticism and to interpret the film through the latter’s point of view. In addition, applying formalist criticism as a way to examine the film’s structure and define the microcosm with its specific mechanisms of presenting the story. Lastly, I progressively decoded certain scenes

and applied different psychoanalytical and feminist film theories such as Laura Mulvey's male gaze and passive female, Carol Clover's androgynous female and Gaylyn Studler's masochistic gaze, so as to investigate in which way do the women on screen relate to their male counterparts, how they use female agency to discover and assert their personal power and further on interpreting how the male spectator responds to viewing these gun-wielding (phallicized) women.

Discussion

Spring Breakers's narrative comprises of a quartet of college girls, Faith, Brit, Cotty and Candy, who, wanting to "take a break from reality for a little while" (one of the character's words), decide to rob a fast-food restaurant to be able to go on a hedonistic vacation that is spring break. After accomplishing their crime, the girls go on their much anticipated adventure, only to be later arrested for participating in illegal parties. In comes "Alien", a white gangster with a stereotypical black persona, that rescues them and offers the luxury and pleasures of the "American dream". After several incidents, the condescending pressure put on Faith by Alien and a gang related crime that injured Cotty, the remaining two girls avenge their fellow friend alongside their male partner. The film ends after successfully murdering Alien's enemy, killing him in the process, and the girls returning to their old college lives. Korine's "candy-coloured neon noir" (Cameron, 2016) inspired by MTV's show *Spring Break*, is a depiction of modern-day hip-hop culture and the disillusionment of the American Dream. Characterized as a black comedy, Korine's aesthetically pleasing image and violent behaviorism trivialize this culture without denaturalizing it. At first glance and, the abundance of neon-colored bikinis and dancing buttocks coupled with hefty drug use and phallic lollipop sucking are framed favorably to showcase the women's bodies, suggesting that this film is nothing short of yet another male-oriented fantasy. The first scene, mainly comprising of slow-motion breasts and substantial alcohol consumption accompanied by a Skrillex tune, invites the spectator to enter this transgressive "jouissance" through found footage of partygoers on spring break. Thus, one could point out to Mulvey's analogy of the existence of the female on screen only for erotic contemplation, ultimately disrupting the storyline.

A woman performs within the narrative, the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude. For a moment the sexual impact of the performing woman takes the film into a no-man's-land outside its own time and space. (Mulvey, 1992, p. 62)

Considering the aesthetic of the film, similar to a music video or a dream, the "liquid narrative" (Korine, 2012) often cutting in between scenes, breaking

the diegesis through the use of voiceovers, it appears that the reality/fantasy dichotomy is ultimately fogged, furthering the immersion of the spectator into a trance-like state. If we also consider the marketing approach consisting of pin-up photos and posters of the scantily clad girls caressing each other, the film's producers clearly know their primary consumers. However, Korine may have chosen to start the film in this manner to lure its target audience: straight males and assert truths about its characters throughout the film only to thwart them afterward. The constituting extratextual choice of starring the four protagonists as previous Disney stars: Selena Gomez (Faith), Cotty (Rachel Korine), Brit (Ashley Benson) and Candy (Vanessa Hudgens) who have, for most of their life, been branded as wholesome "Christian" girls becomes the very first step towards disbelieving the debauchery that ensues, also adding a self-referential aspect to the film.

Second-wave feminists broadened the political agenda of their predecessors and, from the 1960s to 1990s, have requested gender equality on topics and issues such as heteronormativity, sexuality, family, the workplace, reproductive rights etc. While successful political change ensued after massive legislative wins (*The Equal Pay Act* of 1963), it unsuccessfully managed the inclusion of people of color and ultimately created a dispute regarding identity. As Susan Archer Mann and Douglas J. Huffman stated:

Chronologically, we argue that the initial challenges to second wave feminism shared a focus on difference, but resulted in two opposing political camps: one that embraced identity politics as the key to liberation; and a second that saw freedom in resistance to identity. The former is best illustrated by feminists of color and ethnicity, whose identity politics and intersectionality theory critiqued the second wave for its alleged essentialism, white solipsism, and failure to adequately address the simultaneous and multiple oppressions they experienced. (Archer Mann and Huffman, 2005, p. 58).

The second-wave clung onto the idea that collective identity was crucial in combating the patriarchal view of femininity, eventually condemning even the most minor things such as dress code. Women shouldn't wear clothing that appeals to the male fantasy. However, aren't such preconceptions limiting and similar to the approach of males categorizing what femininity should be?

An aspect of third wave feminism that mystified the mothers of the earlier feminist movement was the readoption by young feminists of the very lip-stick, high-heels, and cleavage proudly exposed by low cut necklines that the first two phases of the movement identified with male oppression. (Rampton, 2015)

Thus, through a third-wave feminism angle, the defining notions of feminine become subjective inasmuch how the individual acts adhere to the

feminist movement. Acknowledging that women's choice and the consciousness of their choice depends on their empirical existence determines the particular political chains from which they will ultimately unshackle.

Korine's critiques regarding *Spring Break's* anti-feminist message stemmed from a multitude of facets, all analogous to second-wave feminism. The ideal body-type protagonists, rarely dressed in something other than bathing suits, dance provocatively in hallways, dormitories, make sexual jokes about pleasing men and drink and party like there's no tomorrow. However, as Roper concisely describes in his review of the film:

When a pre-med student on spring break loses her top, drinks to the point of passing out and grabs a willing lugnut by the ears for six hours of anonymous fun, is she setting the woman's movement back 40 years, or taking charge of her life like any man would do at that age? (Roper, 2013).

While surely appealing to the male audience, as third-wave feminism states, the main difference is that they do so consciously even using the male gaze to assert their personal power. Unlike Mulvey's passive female concept, the strong and active characters use female agency to assert dominance and wreak havoc for pleasure to the point of climax. In one of the more eroticized scenes, Alien (the gangster that bailed the girls out of prison) condescendingly boasts his wealth and power, inviting Brit and Candy to praise him, sensually smelling his money and eerily kissing him. The male fantasy dissipates when the girls pick up the guns that he was so eager to show them and point it at him, at which point the all-powerful and prosperous male agitates. "Careful with that, it's loaded!", "That's better!" playfully answers Candy. The girls pressure Alien, kneeling him into submission and proceed to taunt him, "You think that you can just fucking own us? What if we just used you to come here, and in five seconds we just shoot you?" The power reversal culminates when Brit and Candy stick the gun in Alien's mouth, consequently prompting him to fellate the gun while holding the girl's buttocks, laughing and professing his love in the end. The subversion of the patriarchal capitalist fantasy of affluent abundance equating in women's desirability is quickly strengthened by using the man's own symbolic phallus (the gun) against him. However, the unexpected twist of the alpha male engaging in the dominant women's play is, as Nampande Londe writes, a specificity of Gaga Feminism and, therefore of third-wave feminism. "In no framework other than that of Gaga does the emasculation of a hypermasculine character precede romance. Moreover, the ensuing romance blossoms between not one dominant man and one submissive woman, but three dominant people." (Londe, 2014, p. 89) The fluctuation of gender norms, exchanging power dynamic and liberation of sexual convention challenges the order of things by constructing a transgressive fantasy space in

which morality or societal norms are distorted.

The ensuing contradictory function (and contradictory criticism) of the film's self-reflexive nature arises from the hyper-violent female coupled with its hyper-feminine sexuality. *Spring Breakers* incites the possibility of sexual objectification of the female while simultaneously being a powerful active subject. The use of the gun as a symbolic phallus and the overall violence enacted by the women on screen would suggest a masculinization of the female, symbolically shape-shifting them into Carol J. Clover's concept of man in drag. In her psychoanalytical investigation of rape-revenge/slasher films, Clover has formulated that because the female heroine assumes bisexual or androgynous characteristics (being autonomous, using boy's names etc.), the male viewer is able to identify with her through the one-sex body (Clover, 1992). However, Clover's assessment was based on women who rarely show their corporality, and simply categorizing them into symbolic transvestites for their use of a figurative phallus would be an overstatement in this particular case. The Machiavellian girls strategically manipulate the male gaze using their feminine body as a weapon, ultimately seducing and forcing Alien into submission for their personal power and amusement, at times even poking at his masculinity. "Are you scared? Scaredy pants...". In Jeffrey A. Brown's essay on stripper-revenge films, she posits that the use of guns "do more to eroticize the guns than to masculinize the woman" (in McCaughey and King, 2001, p. 63). The seductive manner through which the protagonists assert dominance, kissing and stroking the pistols bears no relation to, for example, Sarah (Linda Hamilton) from *Terminator 2*, who resembles the corporality and attitude of a male. Nevertheless, doesn't this provocative approach of sexed-up violent women, even with their individual and distinct female agency, still appeal to the male gaze? The reversal of the stereotypical damsel in distress doesn't connote that her to-be-looked-at-ness vanishes. In his analysis of the Hong Kong production *Heroic Trio*, whose protagonists are sexily dressed gun wielding women, Wendy Arons's antithetical remark posits that while the violent women are celebrated for their power, their primary status as sex objects undermines the threat of castration.

The focus on the body as a female body – as a body in ostentatious display of breasts, legs, and buttocks – does mitigate the threat the women pose to "the very fabric of ... society" by reassuring the (male) viewer of his privileged position as the possessor of the objectifying gaze. (in McCaughey and King, 2001, p. 40)

However, Alien's male gaze (especially in the eroticized scene mentioned above) and subsequently of the spectator is ultimately punished converting it from sadistic to masochistic and to the pinnacle of his own pleasure. Gaylyn Studlar constructed an objecting theory to Mulvey's exclusive possessive and

sadistic gaze, stating that the masochistic desire to watch these phallicized women perform dominating acts, analogous to Freud's theory of castration and fetishistic scopophilia, are as much at the core of male pleasure as its counterpart (Studlar, 1985). Thus, just as the woman can take both active and passive attributes so can the man find pleasure in submission rather than possession. Throughout the film, from Alien's submissive fellatio of the girls' guns to Cotty drunkenly teasing a boy at the party, not letting him "get this pussy", the exchanging power dynamics is ultimately reinforced by the duality of the sadistic/masochistic pleasure which in turn please the male viewer. As Jeffrey A. Brown affirmed, either "the voyeur in the theater or the living room is safely afforded the same fantasy of possession and the subsequent masochism of submission." (in McCaughey and King, 2001, p. 63) or simply, males just like looking at "Naked babes, dude! Lots of naked babes!" (Sassatelli, 2011, p. 132)

Conclusion

Spring Breakers is a prototype of film that challenges both Mulvey's fixed notion of the male gaze and identity vis-à-vis second-wave feminism by encapsulating and conflicting them, thus creating a different approach towards meaning and interpretation of spectatorship. In contemporary cinema, feminist films have risen in number and diversity, opting either for a subjective view in the individual women's questions or dilemmas or a unifying look on how females struggle with patriarchy, sexual objectification and stereotyping affect their agency. Thereafter, ending with a question among many more to come, should feminist films "primarily negate dominant patriarchal conventions or does femininity itself produce artistic creativity and a feminine aesthetic?" (Sassatelli, 2011, p. 132)

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