



The Laceration Of Lascivious Lens: Unraveling Stereotypical Representation And Objectification Of Women In Movies With The Help Of Laura Mulvey's Perspectives

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Abstract:

With the advancement of technology and mass media it seems that the patriarchal system is growing stronger and the objectification of women is more rapidly being promoted and propagated than ever. Cinema, since its inception, has drastically evolved with the help of many technical innovations but its portrayal of the female characters still does not seem to have undergone any revolutionary change. Instead of reflecting the actual reality, it still continues to be a medium of representing and reinforcing patriarchal desires and ideologies. In most of the films, while the male characters are placed at the centre of the narrative, the female characters are positioned at the centre of visual attraction for the gratification of the "male gaze". This is how the female characters are presented as erotic objects whose only significance lies in their ability to provoke and pacify the male sexual desire. In this paper, I aim to analyze how the male audience derives pleasure by watching the female characters in films with the help of Laura Mulvey's theories which she has formed on the basis of Freudian 'scopophilia' and Lacanian 'Mirror Stage' in her essay "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*." Here, I also intend to interpret instances of how the objectification and stereotyping of the female characters take place in *The Blue Angel*, *The Seven Year Itch*, *Basic Instinct*, and *L.A. Confidential*, some of the popular Hollywood films in different decades of the 20th century.

Key Words: Psychoanalysis, Objectification, Mirror Stage, Scopophilia, Hollywood Cinema

The difference between mirror and media is that the former reflects and the latter represents. Representation in regard to women, as it might be observed, is never innocent and is always influenced by hegemonic ideologies of the patriarchal system. The evidence of women being wrongly represented in a large section of literature, religious scriptures, and various art forms can easily be traced from the antiquity till the contemporary time. In the present era of advancing technology and mass media, the identity of women is being stereotyped and misrepresented more rapidly than ever. Cinema, one of the very major sources of mass media, since its inception, has drastically evolved with the involvement of many technical innovations but its portrayal of the female characters still seems not to have undergone any revolutionary change. Instead of mirroring the actual reality, it still continues to be a medium of representing and reinforcing patriarchal desires and ideologies.

Hollywood cinema, despite its huge diversity, consists of an enormous section of films which represents female figures in an excessively falsifying manner. Even many of the great directors who are well known for their subtle portrayals of characters and events have also done the same mistake. The audience accepts these misrepresentations as true depictions of female characteristics without much inquiry and in this way, false notions of female figures are constructed. Laura Mulvey, in her essay "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*" (1975) discusses these issues regarding 'stereotyping' and 'objectification' of women with the use of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical theories. She criticizes how the "unconscious" of the patriarchal

system justifies the objectification of women in films by asserting that as women suffer from “castration complex”; an inferiority complex that supposedly arises due to the lack of “phallus”, they need to be presented as fetishistic objects to fill the void that is created due to the absence of ‘phallus’ and thus, to appear sexually and socially acceptable to their male counterparts in the “Symbolic Order”. In this way, patriarchy imposes certain roles on female figures for its own benefit which, following Mulvey’s argument, partake in stereotyping and crystalizing women as “image” and men as “bearer[s] of the look”.

In most of the mainstream films, as it is clearly evident, the male character plays an active role while the female character a passive one. However, while the male character is placed at the centre of the narrative, the female character is positioned at the centre of visual attraction for the gratification of the “male gaze”. Here, it is essential to pay attention to John Berger’s observation in *Ways of Seeing* (1972): “Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at...”. This resonates in Mulvey’s critique of the representation of women as objects of “looked-at-ness” or passive agents whose essence is controlled by the appreciation of men, the active agents of the patriarchal social system.

The act of deriving pleasure by looking at the activity of others, in Freudian term, is known as ‘scopophilia’ which Mulvey employs in her discourse to depict how the cinema works as a medium to present female characters as erotic objects whose only significance lies in their capacity to provoke and pacify the male sexual desire. According to her, there could be two types of scopophilia: 1) “fetishistic scopophilia” which may also be referred to as virtual “object libido” and 2) “narcissistic scopophilia” which may be significantly associated with the function of “ego ideal”. In the case of the former, the male spectator derives pleasure by directly looking at the female character on the screen as an erotic object. In the case of the latter, Lacan’s notion of “Mirror Stage” is applied. It shows how the dark cinema-hall becomes an illusionary mechanism for entering into the state of the “Imaginary.” The male spectator, as a child misrecognizes its image on the mirror as more perfect and complete, identifies himself with the male protagonist projected on the screen. As the male protagonist in the film possesses the female protagonist, the spectator also gets an opportunity to indirectly possess her. In these ways, it can be argued, the female actor is doubly possessed as an erotic object: first, by the male actor, director and other associates present in the making of the film, and second, by the male spectators during the de-codification of the film.

The stereotyping of female figures as erotic objects for men’s visual-sexual satisfaction can be traced in numerous Hollywood films. Although Mulvey has given incidents from some films of eminent directors to discuss her theories, there are diverse films which need specific approaches to unravel different underlying dimensions of objectification. Thus, here in this paper, I intend to discuss some other films for further understanding different ways of how stereotyping and objectification of women continued to exist throughout the different decades of the 20th century.

From the very early period of the beginning of cinema, as it is evident, women have been projected as erotic objects for men. Josef von Sternberg’s *The Blue Angel* (1930) can be taken as a great example. From the very beginning of the film, the objectification of Lola Lola (played by Marlene Dietrich), a performer/entertainer who is immensely famous among the men in the city, can be traced through the cards in which her image is portrayed as an object of sexual possession. These cards are commonly found in the bags of young school boys who surreptitiously visit the bar called “The Blue Angel” where she performs as a singer. After getting to know about her from his students, Immanuel Rath, a pedantic professor, visits the bar and as soon as his eyes meet Lola Lola he gets captivated by her charm. It is noteworthy that though she sings songs, it is not her voice but only her physical appearance that is highlighted as a matter of attraction. In the meantime, when Rath meets Lola Lola personally, she is shown trying to attract his attention by behaving with promiscuity, denoting that she always behaves in this manner with all other unknown men she meets. This scene is surreptitiously watched by some of his students who seem to be partaking into a voyeuristic act. After regular visits to her, one day, not caring about his status in the society as a member of the respectable elite class, Rath gives Lola Lola proposal of marriage, and she interestingly accepts it despite knowing the fact that in her profession she has to have multiple relations with various types of men which might disturb Rath later. And it is this inseparable attachment with her profession which leads Rath to his utmost humiliation and eventual death. Thus, Lola Lola appears to be the reason for the destruction of a reputed man in the eyes of the elite class society. The fact that it was Rath who had come to her life to possess her as a sexual object is not explicitly portrayed and thus, it is she who appears to be the reason of his downfall.

The emphasis on the female protagonists as performers leads this discussion to the next the film *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) directed by Billy Wilder, in which the infidelity of husbands in the contemporary American cities is made generalized by showing the allusion to the medieval Manhattan in which during the summer time, wives were sent away to less warm places, while husbands remained in the warm land to attend their business and if any other girl appeared there, they would feel inclined towards her. Richard Sherman (played by Tom Ewell), an elite American, after sending off his son and wife to the summer vacation, starts attempting to sexually possess a very beautiful unnamed blonde model, only referred to as the Girl (played by Marilyn Monroe) who has recently come to live in the upper floor of the same apartment he lives in. The portrayal of the Girl as sexually explicit and also some sort of ignorant becomes the sensation for the male audience because it allows them to deny the importance of her intellectual faculties and focus on her as only a body meant for the purpose of their erotic entertainment. The film shows that the only way the Girl earns money and gets opportunities is by using her physical charm, making her appear as a paragon of the early media-based consumerist culture. She can be thought to be in contrast with Richard's wife who seems to be happily dependent on her husband's income. The film seems to propound the idea that it is only through either marriage or working as provocative commodities women can sustain their lives, and as if there is no other way for them.

In contrast to the portrayal of the Girl in *The Seven Year Itch* as unintelligent and ignorant, the portrayal of the female protagonist as both highly intelligent and sexually overt brings in focus on the concept of 'femme fatale'; a phenomenon in the cinematic universe which is highly appealing to the male masses. Although, the cinematic representation of a seductive and deadly woman offers a complimentary fantasy world for the male spectator's erotic scopophilia, the image of the female figure, here, is both pleasurable and threatening to him. It creates a threat to the male supremacy and at the same time, gives pleasure to the 'somasochistic male gaze'. It expounds the notion that all women who are independent and sexually explicit are evil, and thus, falling in love with a such a woman can lead a man to his ultimate downfall. *Basic Instinct* (1992), directed by Paul Verhoeven, depicts such a character named Catherine Tramell (played by Sharon Stone) who is the murderer but is constantly deviating all the attempts of investigation by her salacious behaviour and physical charisma. She keeps enticing Detective Nick (played by Michael Douglas) with her physical beauty and distracts him from his concentration to investigate the case – the murder of John Boz who was killed by her while having sex. Catherine entices Nick in such a manipulative manner that he eventually becomes so lustfully attracted to her that it fills his mind with irrational doubtlessness about her which becomes the reason for the death of Beth, his psychiatrist and Gus, his associate. It is interesting to note that though Catherine is a writer, this fact is often undermined; it is only her manipulative sexuality that is presented as the centre of attraction. Unlike many other major thrilling films where the male murderer is presented as using only his wit and intellect to escape the consequence of his crime; e.g. Noah Cross (played by John Huston) in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) or Keyser Soze (played by Kevin Spacey) in Byran Singer's *The Usual Suspects* (1995), wit and intellect are not only means but also promiscuity and seductive nature are necessary for the female murderer to escape the consequence of her crime.

Due to the propagation of ostentatious representations by means of mass media, the audience is kept fascinated about the fabricated glamorous world of the film industry. The male spectators admire film actresses but at the same time, develop fantasy to sexually possess them. Curtis Hanson's *L.A. Confidential* (1997), despite being a good detective film, can be looked upon as representative of the severe objectification of women. 'Fleur-de-Lis' is a party where various women, who had undergone surgery to get appearance of famous Hollywood actresses, arrive as hookers to cater to wealthy and influential men. One such woman is Lynn Bracken (played by Kim Basinger) who looks exactly like Veronica Lake, a famous Hollywood actress in the 1940s, gets involved in the investigation of the case of genocides in the city. She immediately becomes the love-interest of Bud White (played by Russell Crowe), one of the police officers. As the plot proceeds, their relationship gets more intimate. But a moment comes when Lynn has sexual encounter with Edmund Exley (played by Guy Pearce), another police officer and an associate of Bud. The revelation of this secret leads Bud to fight Exley. However, after the case of genocides gets solved due to their collaborative involvement, Bud decides to be with Lynn despite the adultery she has committed. In the last scene, during the conversation between her and Exley, Lynn comments "some men get the world, others get ex-hookers and a trip to Arizona" which reveals her acceptance of herself as a commodity. She is presented as a reward to Bud just like the "Badge of Valour" to Exley as if the essence of both of them depends on their efficiency to gratify the needs of their 'possessors.'

Cinema plays a significant role in shaping the thoughts of people. It is through cinema various standards of gender inequality between male and female identity have been and are being constructed. The investigation of the films in different decades of the 20th century makes it clear how the female characters have been presented as objects of “looked-at-ness” in the patriarchal set-up. Most of the mainstream films represent female characters either as playing a submissive role or as beings of overt sexuality. From Mulvey’s point of view in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” these films can be called ‘illusionistic narratives’ because they create false characteristics of women and try to generalize them. By exposing the functions of the patriarchal indoctrination in cinema, Mulvey, thus, encourages us to challenge the misrepresentations of women and demand for ‘realistic narrative’ films which will represent not only females but also characters of all other sexes with authentic illustration and practical terms.

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