

The “Male Gaze” in Lesbian Sexual Relations - Based on *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

Lincong Jing^{1,*}

¹ Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International Collage, Cultural Creativity and Management, Zhuhai, China, 519087

*Corresponding author. Email: n830024112@mail.uic.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

Portrait of a Lady on Fire is the story of Marianne, a young and talented woman painter who paints portraits of a young lady Héloïse. As time goes by, their relationship changes emotionally. As one of the best feminist films, the “female gaze” and the core of feminism in the film are constantly analyzed and studied. However, this paper attempts to explore the “male gaze” in lesbian sexual relationships by analyzing the film's audible language and related content. In the end, it was concluded that the “male gaze” does not only exist between the opposite sex, but in lesbian sexual relationships, the dominant party will still unconsciously stand in the position of “bystander”.

Keywords: Male gaze, feminism, lesbian sexuality, audiovisual, lens narrative, mythology

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminist cinema began in the 1960s as a genre of films produced by female directors, focusing on the situation of women in different eras, showing their survival, psychological perceptions and other aspects as central themes. When focusing on feminist films, people need to pay attention to two concepts: the male gaze and the female gaze. In a patriarchal society, men do not gaze at each other, and women are the second sex to be seen, while men enjoy the pleasure of voyeurism through various media and channels, becoming the first sex to watch and gaze [1]. Unlike the male gaze, the female gaze has a female starting point and is intended to establish a female discourse. In this paper, we want to investigate whether the “male gaze” still exists in lesbian relationships when the male role is absent. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* tells the emotional story of Héloïse, a reluctant bride about to be married in late 18th century France, and Marianne, the painter who is commissioned to paint her portrait. The painter, Marianne, receives a commission from a countess who knows her father and travels to an island in Brittany to paint a portrait of the young lady Héloïse, which is to be mailed to her fiancé, whom she has never met. Since Héloïse does not cooperate with the portrait, Marianne disguises herself as a playmate who guards Héloïse's safety. As time passes, the two discover the emotions that exist between them, and their vision and relationship change. As the painting

is gradually completed, they face an inescapable and final parting. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* gives Héloïse a position of expression that frees her from the position of mere spectator and gives her equal status with Marianne. As Marianne observes Héloïse, Héloïse also observes her.

Since the *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is a relatively excellent and typical feminist film, the inherent values related to feminism in the film, such as “female gaze”, “identity gaze” and “affirmative action”, have been continuously dissected and studied. The focus of this article is mainly on the “male gaze”, trying to argue that in lesbian relationships, even if the male role is missing or even non-existent, there is a possibility of the existence of the “male gaze”.

2. THE “MALE GAZE” IN *PORTRAIT OF A LADY ON FIRE*

2.1. Cultural Background

The story takes place in the period of eighteenth-century classicism, in which painters, or more precisely female painters, fully learn color, light, color grading, composition, and seek opportunities for creation, but even so, they are still unable to compete with men in terms of mainstream social recognition. In those days, women painters were not even allowed to use men as models, but without a concept of male structure it was difficult to paint masterpieces, so Marianne had to

practice painting male models in secret. At the end of the film, Marianne lends her father's name so that her painting "Orpheus" can be exhibited in an exhibition. Compared to Héloïse, she seems to have more power over her own destiny, but she is still forced to prostrate herself under the dismal and unjust social opinion and fate. Eighteenth-century France held salons of inquiry on women's views on the body and identity, which led to the development of modern civil society. Although the efforts of salon women have not completely broken the shackles and prejudices imposed on women by traditional consciousness, the 18th century French salons are also a history of women's participation in and guidance of the development of modern civilization, confirming the influence of women on social and cultural norms, which has a non-negligible place in the history of Western development [2], and they never stopped their struggle to achieve women's emancipation and development, and to achieve equality between men and women.

2.2. The Gaze in Portraiture

Sartre says this in *Being and Nothingness*, the gaze of another makes oneself aware of the object that one is gazing at when one is an object [3]. In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, we learn from Héloïse's mother when Marianne first enters the lady's house that the disadvantageous position of women in society is expressed in the position of the "object" being looked at, and the portrait is not only a painting but also a symbol that exposes the disadvantageous position of women. The portrait is not only a painting, but also a symbol that reveals the disadvantageous position of women, and it serves the male who has the power to view it, and it is more important and valued than women themselves. In the process of creating portraits, there will inevitably be the painter's gaze on the model. There is a relationship of power and domination between the two sides of the gaze [4]. The portrait of the young lady is the one that makes her an "object" to be gazed at, losing her value as a subject, becoming a marital commodity, and at the same time kidnapping and controlling her, depriving her of her freedom and demanding that she become the image of a woman that conformed to the expectations of society at the time. Héloïse's refusal to paint for her previous male painter was a double resistance to the arranged marriage and the male gaze. Marianne, on the other hand, is a woman, but the gaze she casts on Héloïse is similar to that of the male painter, as they both fix Héloïse on the canvas as an object through their gaze. The first painting is the result of Marianne's voyeurism, as she accompanies Héloïse in the process of silently noting everything she needs to present on the canvas. The difference was that Héloïse herself rarely smiled and often frowned, but in the first painting, Marianne, as the creator, painted Héloïse as a standard demure aristocratic lady, just like the most popular portraits of the day. The Héloïse in the painting is mild and submissive, with a plump figure and

cheeks revealing a healthy flush, but lifeless, without emotion and personality, and not at all vivid, completely fitting the characteristics of a woman in the male perspective. In addition, during the painting of the first painting, Marianne had secretly sat in the position of Héloïse, the subject of the painting, to imagine Héloïse's appearance by observing her own posture through the mirror placed opposite, but there was no Marianne's face in the mirror due to the angle, which also belonged to Marianne's gazing at Héloïse, by imagining herself as her, even though the person in the mirror was herself. When Héloïse saw the portrait, it was very straightforward that the person in the painting was not herself, thus questioning Marianne. Marianne is forced to confront the fact that what she is painting is not essentially Héloïse, but rather an emulation of the male pictorial perspective, a decidedly male gaze projecting its fantasies onto a correspondingly stylized female form [5]. In this relationship between painting and being painted, the painter is active, while the painted is passive. Marianne's "male gaze" on Héloïse begins to disintegrate when she destroys her work with her own hands after hearing Héloïse's comment, and the gaze between the painter and the painted becomes two-way, forming an equal gaze relationship. As Marianne discovers the wildness and anger inside Héloïse, her portrait of Héloïse becomes vivid. So the second portrait is a true record of Héloïse's appearance and a free expression of emotion, without any sense of scrutiny. Before Marianne and Héloïse parted ways, Héloïse wanted Marianne to leave her a self-portrait of Marianne as a memento of their time together. In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray argues that the male subject needs the female as the "other (mirror)" to reflect her own existence, thus confirming male subjectivity [6]. And this self-portrait eliminates the subject-object relationship between Marianne and Héloïse, and also embodies the existence of independence.

2.3. The collision of myth and reality

2.3.1. The "Male Gaze" in Mythological History - Orpheus and Eurydice

In ancient Greek mythology, there are many female figures, among which Venus represents the perfect goddess, the male imagination of the ideal woman: beautiful, gentle and charming. Pandora, on the other hand, signifies danger and is seen as a seductive but impure being, often bringing disaster. What they have in common is that they are the product of the male gaze and are placed in the position of being watched. By gazing at women, men exhort and pleasure women [7]. The feminist film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* features a passage from the Roman poet Ovid's "Metamorphoses" about Orpheus, the famous musician, poet, and prophet of ancient Greek mythology. Orpheus' beloved wife, Eurydice, was bitten by a poisonous snake and died while

playing in the wild. Out of extreme grief and reluctance, Orpheus recklessly entered the underworld and begged the king and queen of the underworld to allow Eurydice to come back to life for the sake of true love. The King of the Underworld agreed to Orpheus' request, but on one condition: on the way back, Orpheus had to walk in front of Eurydice and could not look back until he reached the ground, otherwise Eurydice would not be reborn. However, just before they are about to step into the ground, Orpheus cannot help but turn his head, and the last thing he sees of Eurydice is her rapid descent into the underworld [8]. The main character of the scene, which is obviously a woman's fate, is Orpheus, a man, to whom the subject of all the verbs belongs. Marianne thinks that Orpheus could have endured, and she thinks that Orpheus made a choice by choosing the memory of Eurydice as a poet rather than her herself. And Héloïse thinks it may have been Eurydice who called out to Orpheus at the last moment, calling him to turn back. The mythical Orpheus and Eurydice correspond to the real Marianne and Héloïse, and their different interpretations of the mythical story lay the groundwork for the ending.

2.3.2 *The “Male Gaze” in Lesbian Sexuality - Marianne and Héloïse*

The precise meaning of feminist film is a work directed by a woman, with a female perspective and a clear female consciousness. In this sense, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is a typical feminist film. So, is there a “male gaze” in lesbian relationships when the male figure is absent? There are two stages in Marianne's gaze on Héloïse, which we have already mentioned in the previous article. The first stage of the gaze has two implications: the first is her gaze on Héloïse as a painter. The second is the gaze from the perspective of Héloïse fiancé. At this point, the relationship between the two gazes is extremely unequal in terms of subject and object power. In the second stage, however, the subject and object of the gaze change. Marianne abandons the male “scrutinizing” gaze and begins to “look at” Héloïse, and Héloïse, who is being gazed at, turns her gaze to Marianne. Although Marianne, as a painter, is accustomed to being in the position of “observer” when creating, at this stage, Marianne and Héloïse are actually “observers” of each other and are equal. The shift in perspective between the two women in the process of falling in love transforms the gaze of power into mutual recognition, conveying feminine consciousness and speaking of feminine emotions in subtle ways. In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Marianne plays the role of none other than Orpheus, who is the representative of the male figure in the relationship and has a certain choice over Héloïse. In addition, in the painting about the mythology, Orpheus is dressed in red and Eurydice in green, corresponding to the red dress that Marianne is wearing and the green dress that Héloïse is wearing. Her relationship with Héloïse, like the one shown in the myth, could only exist on this

isolated island, with no chance of taking Héloïse away. But unlike the myth, Héloïse chased Marianne down the stairs as she left the island, calling out to Marianne to look back. This is different from the myth, where a female motive is added. Héloïse behavior is the same as her explanation of why Orpheus turned back in the previous article. Marianne in the film follows in her father's footsteps and struggles to get a foothold in a male-filled profession of painters; she is single and does not marry to have freedom, but she has been influenced too much in a male-centered society that makes her unconsciously put herself in the position of the dominant, observer in the relationship at the very beginning. For a female painter like her, who has to make a living from painting, concealing her sharpness at the right time in order to continue to survive in the industry means that her status dictates that she cannot resist as Héloïse did. On the contrary, Héloïse, who is not free to wait to be married, resists the gaze and obtains an equal status with Marianne. At the end of the film, Marianne chooses to turn back and leave Héloïse in her memory, and Héloïse disappears into the darkness behind the door. Years later, Marianne borrows her father's name for an exhibition of paintings of the very story of Orpheus. And while previous paintings of Orpheus usually depicted the moment before he turned or after he turned when Eurydice fell into the abyss, in Marianne's painting they had the opportunity to say goodbye. This painting is Marianne's new interpretation of the myth of Orpheus, an artist's re-creation. In the painting, Orpheus is wearing a blue coat and Eurydice is wearing a white sarong corresponding to Marianne's blue coat and Héloïse 's white wedding dress when she says goodbye to her.

3. CONCLUSION

Knowing her destiny, Héloïse still chooses to call Marianne to face her inescapable fate; Marianne, however, wants to escape from this fruitless relationship and from her unchangeable fate. In a time when women cannot decide their own destiny, even though she knows the outcome, Héloïse is still willing to face it by “making her own choice”. The “male gaze” does not only exist between heterosexuals, but *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is a feminist film that shows the self-centered nature of the male gaze. In same-sex relationships, when two people have different destinies, the dominant one will still unconsciously stand in the position of “spectator”. But when she leaves this island, Marianne, a female painter, has changed the male gaze into a gaze of identity, realizing the dual independence of self-consciousness and artistic creation, and although Héloïse cannot completely break away from the bondage of patriarchy, she still calls Marianne with her independent consciousness and makes a choice worth remembering for the rest of her life.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Lincong Jing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

On the occasion of the completion of this paper, I would first like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Ms Alisa Wang, who gave me patient guidance and help from the beginning of the paper to the first draft to the final completion of the months and would analyze the paper with me when my writing entered a bottleneck, propose valuable revision suggestions and carefully check the errors in my paper.

In addition, I would like to thank Prof. David Howard, who is my film and television initiation teacher, who makes the professional knowledge interesting and easy to understand, which makes me very interested in film and television, and I will consider studying and further studying in this field in the future.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents for their support and encouragement behind me, so that I can concentrate on writing my thesis.

REFERENCES

- [1] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* [M] Shanghai Translation Press, 2011.
- [2] Verena von der Heyden-Rynsch, *Salon: The Lost Cradle of Culture* [M] Left Bank Culture, 2003, pp. 5.
- [3] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existence and Nothingness* [M] Life, Reading, New Knowledge, 1943.
- [4] Danny Cavallaro, *Keywords of Cultural Theory* [M] Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2006.
- [5] Yang Yuanying, *Readings in Film Theory* [M] World Book Publishing Company Beijing, 2011, pp. 526.
- [6] Lucy Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* [M] Zhengzhou: Henan University Press, 2013.
- [7] John Berger, *The Way of Seeing* [M] Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2007, pp. 76.
- [8] Publius Ovidius Naso, *Metamorphoses* [M] People's Literature Publishing House, 1984.