



Different Expressions of Queer Feminist Film Narrative from the Perspective of Anti-"Gaze": A Case Study of *The Handmaiden* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

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Abstract. The South Korean film *The Handmaiden*, directed by Park Chan-wook, and the French film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, directed by Céline Sciamma, exert substantial influence in the field of queer feminist film studies. However, the narrative differences between these two films have not been adequately explored. This paper, based on Laura Mulvey's concept of the "gaze," introduces Simone de Beauvoir's notion of "the Other" to examine the distinct visual styles and ideological cores of these two similar-type films in terms of character portrayal, narrative expression, and ending design, thereby exploring the diversified expressions of queer feminist cinema. Firstly, through a rigorous review of the literature, I scientifically define the concept of "anti-gaze," filling a scholarly gap. Secondly, I propose a re-interpretation of the two films through three dimensions: "The choice of the gazer and the gazed," "The expression of the process of gazing and anti-gazing," and "Female identity after anti-gazing." I argue that *The Handmaiden* embodies Laura Mulvey's traditional concept of the male power gaze, using impactful visual elements like sex and eroticism to directly confront and resist the gaze expressed between men and women, and between women themselves, under unequal power relations. The escape of the two female protagonists at the end represents a temporary respite. In contrast, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* completely avoids male presence, exploring the male gaze from a female perspective. Its painterly visuals depict the transformation of the female painter's gaze from being objectified by men to an intense and equal mutual gaze with the lady, culminating in a conclusion where the two women do not achieve a conventional happy ending, but rather a genuine self-identity realization under the historical context. Through a comparative analysis of the narratives of the two films, this paper attempts to uncover more possibilities in the narrative structure of queer feminist films, thereby encouraging deeper exploration of the lives of marginalized groups within the cinema.

Keywords: Queer Feminist Cinema, Gaze, Anti-Gaze, *The Handmaiden*, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

1 Introduction

Queer feminist cinema has already become a major trend in mainstream film. Existing domestic and international studies on the South Korean film *The Handmaiden* primarily take a comparative approach to analyzing the differences in character portrayal between male and female roles based on the film's three-act narrative structure. In contrast, research on the film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* tends to emphasize egalitarian ideas, highlighting the transition from the male gaze to equal recognition.

This paper creatively conducts a narrative-level horizontal comparison of both films and introduces the concept of the "anti-gaze." It aims to reinterpret Laura Mulvey's concept of the "gaze" from three aspects to further explore the narrative differences in female queer cinema: 1) different choices of the gazer and the gazed; 2) different expressions of the processes of gazing and anti-gazing; 3) female identity after anti-gazing. *The Handmaiden* exemplifies absolute male gaze, with its visuals filled with sexual and erotic tension, suggesting that the female escape is temporary. Conversely, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* completely avoids male presence, using serene, painterly visuals to achieve female self-identification in a specific historical context.

2 Gaze — Anti-Gaze

Cinema and gender share a complex and intertwined relationship, with the "gaze" theory being a key framework for exploring gender relations in film. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir proposes that the "Other" refers to marginalized groups within the power structures and norms tacitly accepted by the mainstream. The gaze represents a superior self-consciousness, a spontaneous top-down scrutiny, where the gazer is the subject, and the one being gazed at is the object. Women, constructed as the "Other" by men, are passive objects. One pathway for women to achieve self-redemption and independence is through the deprivation of male desire and power. Another pathway is the construction of self-identity[1].

In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey explores the sources of visual pleasure provided by films. One source is scopophilia: the pleasure derived from looking and being looked at, where the act of looking itself provides pleasure by making another person the object of sexual stimulation. The second source is the pleasure derived from narcissistic scopophilia, where identification with the seen image is formed through narcissism and the construction of the self. Mulvey concludes that both visual pleasure and narrative structure contain a binary opposition—active/male and passive/female. She points out that women become objects to be viewed and displayed, imbuing them with the quality of "to-be-looked-at-ness." This serves two purposes: first, to act as erotic objects within the screen story, and second, to become erotic objects for the audience in the theater. When female characters perform within the plot, the audience's gaze aligns with that of the male characters. Additionally, the audience follows the actions of the male protagonist, projecting their own act of viewing onto him, making him their on-screen

surrogate. The male protagonist's control over the narrative perfectly combines with the audience's active erotic gaze, resulting in a sense of omnipotent satisfaction for the viewer[2].

Based on the following literature, this paper defines the concept of "anti-gaze" as the subversion of traditional gender construction in visual media, the reclamation of control over the gaze by women who are traditionally "the looked-at" in defiance of patriarchy, and the self-identification of women. Rifford,T.M.(2009) suggests that passive, "looked-at" women can also strive to resist patriarchy and attempt to reclaim control over the gaze[3]. Dai Jinhua(2000)posits three dimensions of resistance to the male gaze within anti-gaze strategies: escaping the female predicament under the male gaze, seeking expressions of female self-gaze, and exposing power mechanisms under gender discourse construction[4]. In "The Contradiction of Gaze and Anti-Gaze: The Underclass Awakening and Social Critique in the Film 'The Great Buddha'," Huang Zhongjun and Pan Lulu argue that anti-gaze emerges when a counteractive relationship forms between the gazer and the gazed. The directors use a second camera position to simulate a god's-eye view, thereby achieving a detachment from the gaze and fostering a reflection on the realities of the underclass[5].

3 *The Handmaiden: The Violent Emergence of Female Queerness under the Male Gaze*

3.1 Women: Absolute Enforcers of Patriarchal Discourse

Under the power gaze, the subject is typically positioned as the elevated male perspective, while the "looked-at" female becomes the "Other" object, completely losing her voice. *The Handmaiden* is the only film by Park Chan-wook that deals with a homosexual theme, and it is adapted from British author Sarah Waters' novel "Fingersmith." The film narrates a story of love and betrayal surrounding money, involving a fake count, noblewoman Hideko, a pickpocket named Sook-hee posing as a maid, and the guardian uncle. In this movie, men and women are adversaries. Men possess absolute discourse power, while women are the absolute enforcers of patriarchal discourse. The male protagonist, Uncle Kouzuki, positions himself as the center of power, wielding absolute control over his wife and Hideko. Count Fujiwara considers himself the ultimate victor of the game, using Sook-hee as a tool to get close to Hideko, leveraging Hideko's longing for "freedom" to maximize his own benefits. All the women in this manor are subjects of voyeurism and discipline; their fates are not determined by themselves but by male authority.

3.2 From Audience Experience to Female Gaze

Park Chan-wook uses the camera's position to conspire with the audience's perspective, allowing them to viscerally experience the male gaze from the audience's point of view. Through the rebellion of the female characters, the audience, along with all the male characters in the film, is subjected to the scrutiny of the female gaze.

In "The Female Body in Film Narrative from the Perspective of Body Aesthetics: A Case Study of 'The Handmaiden'," (2019) Huang Yingfei points out that the portrayal of bodies in images can trigger unconscious "somatic experiences" in the audience[6]. When Hideko reads a passage in which the male partner of the Duchess reaches asphyxiation during orgasm, the male dukes in the scene imagine themselves in the position of the male lover. During this shared experience, Hideko passively embodies the image of the whip-wielding Duchess from the book. In this scenario, male viewers are complicit with the guests, as they share what they see with them. The director uses the same perspective for the audience as for the characters in the film, allowing viewers to personally feel the "gaze" and directly experience the pleasure that scopophilia brings to viewers.

Director Park Chan-wook's creation of the anti-gaze aims to break the traditional male gaze through the female gaze. In "What Makes It Neo-Victorian? : The Handmaiden and the Double Internalisation of Cultural Colonisation," (2019) Akira Suwa emphasizes the connection between the film's theatricality and the male gaze[7]. When Hideko is under the male gaze, she uses her performance to manipulate the male viewers. In the book reading scene, Hideko occupies the position of visual and controlling subject. Under her direct gaze, the camera magnifies the anxious male audience attempting to hide evidence of their arousal. This use of performative manipulation contrasts with the natural emotional expressions between her and Sook-hee, thereby showcasing the motivation and effect of the "anti-gaze," transforming the male gaze into the female gaze. In "Recreated Reality by Female Bonds: A Comparative Study on Fingersmith (2005) and The Handmaiden (2016)," (2019) Lee Jeonghwa points out that the power of the gaze and the power from the gaze are intertwined[8]. The solidarity between the two women reconstructs the female community, allowing them to escape the male-dominated space. This perspective suggests that the anti-gaze process involves the unification and escape of the gazed-upon subjects. The love between Sook-hee and Hideko disrupts the Count's schemes and breaks the control of the Uncle.

4 *Portrait of a Lady on Fire: The Rebellion Against the Male Gaze in Female Queerness*

4.1 The Disappearance of Men: The Gaze Between Women

In this film, both the gazer and the gazed are women. To avoid the traditional male gaze, the director includes few male characters, yet the threat of a patriarchal society to women is omnipresent. For example, Marianne, the painter in the film, has fully learned and sought opportunities for creation but still cannot compete with men. In "Focusing on the Margins: Interpreting Same-Sex Desire in 'Portrait of a Lady on Fire' from a Feminist Perspective," (2023) Zhang Siqi points out that the film does not masculinize the female characters—it avoids simply reversing gender roles[9]. The film refuses to shape female characters as subordinates or objects of male gaze. Early in the film, Marianne's gaze on Eloise for the portrait is no different from that of other

male painters. When she paints women like Eloise for male consumption, she must internalize the male gaze. However, Marianne also achieves a certain degree of female self-redemption and independence. By adopting the male painter's gaze while remaining a female, Marianne deprives male painters of their desire and power to gaze upon Eloise during the traditional portrait process.

4.2 From Male Gaze to Equal Gaze

Through Marianne's first portrait, the film conveys the process of the traditional male "gaze," representing Marianne's interpretation of Mulvey's concept of "scopophilia." In "The 'Male Gaze' in Lesbian Sexual Relations - Based on Portrait of a Lady on Fire," (2022)congJing Lin suggests that even in the absence or near-absence of male characters, the possibility of a "male gaze" still exists, with the dominant party unconsciously assuming the role of the "observer." [10] Marianne's first portrait of Eloise is precisely from the perspective of the male gaze, approaching Eloise as an "observer," creating a stereotypical representation of female portraits of the time. Due to Eloise's dissatisfaction, when Marianne erases the portrait, her "male gaze" towards Eloise begins to disintegrate as well.

Through Marianne's second portrait, the film returns to the equal gaze between women. Two women, long oppressed by the male gaze, break the unequal dynamics of "looking" and "being looked at" through love and painting. In the second portrait, Eloise exhibits pride, stubbornness, and disdain for the arranged marriage. Eunsun Kwon, in "Gaze and Gender Dynamics of Portrait of a Lady on Fire," (2022) points out that the portrait deconstructs the formula of "the male painter as observer and the female model gazing at herself through his eyes" and transforms it into an interactive process of giving and receiving the gaze [11]. In the scene where Marianne leans a mirror against Eloise to paint herself, the power of the gaze jumps between the characters. Marianne shifts from being the observer to the observed, gazed at by herself. In this scene, both can simultaneously see themselves—Marianne in the mirror and Eloise in the portrait. They are equals, and their love is equal. Thus, the process of anti-gaze is showcased through the change in the paintings.

5 Comparative Analysis of The Handmaiden and Portrait of a Lady on Fire

First, the choice of the gazer and the gazed. The Handmaiden reflects Laura Mulvey's traditional concept of the male power gaze, whereas Portrait of a Lady on Fire completely bypasses male characters and explores the male gaze from a female perspective.

In the film The Handmaiden, beneath the grand exterior of the mansion lies a complete patriarchal society where all women are tamed into easily manipulated appendages. At the beginning of the film, as the maid Sook-hee enters the mansion by car, a male servant looks directly at her through the car window. This is the first instance of the male gaze in the film. The servant's identity implies that the

construction of male discourse power transcends social status; regardless of which male authority is present, women can only become the "looked-at" "Other." Count Fujiwara, even before entering the game, has already treated Sook-hee and Hideko as disposable pawns.

The film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, there are almost no male characters, as the director intentionally prevents the appearance of male characters, which would symbolize the gender order and gaze power. In this film, both the gazer and the gazed are women. The painter Marianne is both the "gazed-at" and the "gazer." Although she possesses exceptional skills, she is still denied the right to paint male nudes. Because of this, she is a "gazed-at" object, subjected to the male gaze in a patriarchal society. After being hired, Marianne constantly stares at Eloise; at this moment, she is the "gazer," and her gaze towards Eloise is not much different from that of other male painters.

Second, the expression in the process of gazing and anti-gazing. The *Handmaiden* uses impactful visual elements such as sex and eroticism to directly confront and resist the gazes between men and women, as well as between women, under unequal power relations. On the other hand, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* does not present direct or explicit scenes. Instead, it showcases the transformation of the female painter's gaze from being objectified by men to a passionate and equal gaze between the two women.

In *The Handmaiden*, the intense eroticism and violence are emphasized in the relationship and sexual depiction between Hideko and Sook-hee, as well as through their active use of sex toys. Their first sexual encounter occurs on the eve of Hideko's wedding. When Sook-hee still consents to Hideko marrying Fujiwara, Hideko slaps her face hard. The joy of love and the sense of betrayal are successfully established through the explicit depiction of their mutual pleasure. The sex toy, a string of balls, symbolizes both eroticism and violence; it is used by the uncle to hit Hideko's hand as a tool of admonishment. In the book-reading scene, Hideko must recreate herself according to the men's desires and imaginations. Meanwhile, she also manipulates the male audience with her performance, controlling their emotions and states. The act of tearing up the book at the end of the film signifies the rejection of female nudity as a male textbook by the two women. The final complete shot of their naked bodies symbolizes their escape from male control.

In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Marianne's first portrait is intended to please Eloise's fiancé. Therefore, during this painting process, Marianne gazes at Eloise through a male perspective. During the creation of the second portrait, the roles of the gazer and the gazed shift, and the two women use mutual gazes to resist the prolonged oppression of "male gaze" and patriarchy. Eloise asks Marianne, "When you look at me, who do I look at?" They both turn to look at the position of the easel, and the camera pulls in, shifting from a medium shot to a close-up. When Marianne, flustered by Eloise's remark, runs back to her original position, the shot changes from narrow to wide, shifting to Eloise's perspective observing Marianne. This second portrait entirely breaks Marianne's one-sided, power-conscious gaze at Eloise, constructing an equal gaze of mutual recognition between them. In this space and time, completely

stripped of male discourse power and perspective, Marianne's painting transforms from a task into a pleasurable aesthetic activity and a form of self-analysis.

Third, female self-identity after the anti-gaze. The different endings of the two films reflect different constructions of female self-identity. In *The Handmaiden*, the escape of the two women is temporary. In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, both women choose to conceal their love for each other to achieve success within the context of their time.

In *The Handmaiden*, the rebellion of the two women against a closed societal system aims to find a newly created open system. At the end of the film, Hideko and Sook-hee board a ferry to Shanghai. At this point, the two women achieve a unidirectional self-identity: Hideko escapes her uncle's control and gains freedom; Sook-hee abandons wealth and chooses a more direct and pure relationship with Hideko. But have they truly escaped patriarchal control? Does a new social order truly exist? The imagery in the film seems to provide a negative answer: Firstly, the two women choose to escape under the guise of being a married couple, implying the safety of traditional gender identities and the niche and insecurity of a homosexual identity. Hideko needs to disguise herself using a masculine symbol—a mustache. Secondly, the ferry is surrounded by fog as it sails, obscuring the path ahead, foreshadowing the unknown challenges they will face. Finally, although the two women seem to have gained freedom, they still need to continuously hide and disguise themselves in order to survive in the eyes of the outside world, failing to achieve true self-identity.

In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the two female protagonists provide a subversive interpretation of the Orpheus myth. Marianne believes that Orpheus consciously chose to keep the memory of his wife in his heart, calling it "the poet's choice." This interpretation still stands on male will, objectifying Eurydice and viewing her as a vessel for his emotions. In contrast, Eloise believes that it was Eurydice's active call that made Orpheus turn back. Clearly, Eloise considers female subjectivity in her interpretation. She guides Marianne to use an equal, female perspective to gaze at her while painting the portrait, and once again influences Marianne's change in perspective during the myth's reinterpretation. The story of Orpheus turns into a tacit and mutual farewell between two connected souls, foreshadowing Marianne's eventual understanding of the new interpretation of the myth and her choosing to bid farewell to Eloise voluntarily. For Marianne and Eloise, their self-identity lies in the fact that the portrait is no longer a unidirectional gaze process but an equal one. Their future trajectories are decided from each other's perspective, making the optimal choice. They both abandon the male gaze, gaining autonomy over their emotions, minds, and bodies.

6 Conclusions

The expression of queer feminist cinema is diverse. In terms of character portrayal, it can reflect the traditional active/male and passive/female dynamic, or it can explore the choice of gazer and the gazed between women. In narrative expression, it can be

the visually impactful and erotic scenes in *The Handmaiden* or the painterly visuals in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. At its core, it can be about the direct destruction of the male gaze through the construction of a female community, or the nuanced understanding of emotions hidden within societal norms under the male gaze. This comparative study of two queer feminist films enriches and complements the practical outcomes of Laura Mulvey's "gaze" theory, creatively summarizing the concept of "anti-gaze." This includes the subversion of traditional gender constructs in visual media, the reclaiming of gaze control by "looked-at" women as a form of resistance against patriarchy, and the self-identification of women. Additionally, this paper provides more possibilities for the narrative structure of queer feminist cinema, promoting a deeper exploration of the lives of marginalized groups through film.

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