

## Representation of Women in Film

This past year, I've been thinking a lot about women in film and why they're presented the way they are. I mean, the majority of directors are white men so that explains a lot.

Because so many filmmakers are cis men, the depiction of women is through the male gaze. The male gaze, an idea coined by filmmaker Laura Mulvey, defines it as the asymmetry of social and political power between men and women. Women are viewed as sexual objects for pleasure from the eyes of a heterosexual man. "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at." -John Berger (art critic)

This is extremely harmful because it enforces the idea that women exist solely to advance a man's story. Kinda fucked up, don't you think. Some people may think that "oh, it's just a movie, why does it matter how certain people are represented." Viewing sexualized media causes women and girls to internalize these beauty standards and gender roles, leading them to objectify themselves and strive for male validation.

Because of the male gaze, films perpetuate misogynistic ideals. First I'll define misogyny—it's derived from the ancient Greek word "mīsoḡunīā," which means hatred towards women. Films aren't explicitly like "women are terrible, we hate women," it's more insidious than that. Misogyny in film is seen through the objectification and hyper sexualization of women and the demonization of femininity. Some examples are makeover scenes in movies, the manic pixie dream girl trope, and female Marvel superheroes. With makeover scenes, it tells young women that they are only valuable after becoming more attractive to men. Manic pixie dream girl characters like Ramona Flowers from *Scott Pilgrim* and Summer from *500 Days of Summer* are used to teach men something. These female characters don't matter alone, they matter based on their relation to the male characters.

Let's talk about Michael Bay's 2007 "Transformers." There's a scene where Megan Fox's character, Mikaela Banes, checks the hood of a car. I find it interesting because women are allowed to have interests in typically masculine things like sports and cars while women who have interests in typically feminine things are demonized and called basic or boring. It implies that stereotypically female things are inherently bad.

Women who are into these stereotypical male things are a part of this male fantasy. Mikaela Banes was written to cater to the male gaze. Not only is she good with cars, but she's also super hot. They emphasize this with a slow pan up her body, implying that her body is deemed the most important thing about her character. This is an example of the hypersexualization of a female character. Their bodies are exploited and used as props.

Studios do this really weird thing on movie posters where only parts of women's bodies are shown. Women are reduced to their legs, hips, and breasts. This casual dehumanization makes the objectification of women in real life more okay than it should be. (it should never be okay)

Some people believe Hollywood's increase in female representation is getting better but I'd actually argue that a lot of it is counterproductive. For example, a character like Natasha Romanova, also known as Black Widow, may be seen as powerful female representation, but she is really only a sexualized side character. Like why is her costume so form fitting and low cut. Other than being a body and a pretty face, she's written like a man would be written. She's cool because she does things that men do, like having badass combat skills and being physically strong. This subversion of traditional gender roles in film perpetuates the belief that femininity is weak and girls are only cool if they are more masculine. It's giving me girl boss, liberal feminism energy, which does nothing to help liberate women.

In real life, these female characters can lead to what we know as "pick-me girls," women with internalized misogyny who hate on other women for simply being feminine.

Okay before I move on to the next section, there's a monologue from the movie *Gone Girl* which explains the idealization of women from the male gaze really well. \*insert clip\*

## Part 2: Representation of east/southeast asian women

As a southeast asian woman, I have a lot of problems with how asian women are usually portrayed in western media. Female asian characters tend to fall into two stereotypes—there's the lotus blossom where asian women are presented as delicate and submissive, and the dragon lady where asian women are presented as cold, fierce, and assertive. Despite these caricatures being very different, both include the sexualization of asian women.

In Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill Vol. 1*, O-ren is a perfect example of the dragon lady stereotype. She is emotionless, powerful, and through the lens of the white male gaze, sexually deviant. She is a mere exotic object to be a temptation for white men.

Gogo Yubari, O-ren's personal bodyguard, is a 17 year old girl who wears a school uniform. Her sexualization is seen as the camera pans down her legs. This fetishization of the innocent schoolgirl image has reduced young asian girls to being sex objects. I would even go as far as saying it promotes pedophilia. This schoolgirl character would fall into the lotus blossom stereotype, as they are seen as young and naive.

These stereotypes have real life implications. So on March 16th, 2021, there was a mass shooting at asian massage parlors in Atlanta, Georgia. 8 people were killed, 6 being asian women. The suspect had stated that his motive was that he felt the need to eliminate his sexual temptations. The objectification of asian women has been around for centuries and sexualized media portrayals are really not helping anyone.

I just think it's funny when people take my interest in how female characters are portrayed in film as a hobby like no, this actually impacts my life and how others perceive me.

## Part 3

Good female representation is hard to find. Here are some movies that show the complexities of female humanity!

The Farewell directed by Lulu Wang. This comedic drama follows a Chinese-American woman's return to China after her grandmother is diagnosed with terminal cancer. We see the main character's struggle with western vs. eastern values.

Lady Bird directed by Greta Gerwig. This comedic drama follows a 17 year old girl and her coming of age in Sacramento, California. I really like that this movie shows the relationship between a mother and a daughter. It feels very female centered. Although there are romantic relationships in this movie, we get to see the female gaze instead of the male gaze. Lady bird gets to idealize the boys she admires rather than them idealizing her.

Portrait of a lady on fire by Celine Sciamma. This film is about a woman-loving-woman relationship. The relationship between an artist and their muse. Just watch it. Me attempting to explain it will not do this film any justice. Watch it.

Moral of this video: men are bad, consume more art made by women