

Online Conference: Teaching Women's Filmmaking

Abstract

Social Realism and the Female Gaze in Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank*

Motivated by the exploration of the female gaze and sexuality by a female director, this paper examines Andrea Arnold's 2009 film *Fish Tank*. The narrative follows Mia, a lonely and angry teenager who falls in love with her mother's boyfriend. By delving into adolescent desires and anxieties, Arnold offers a different perspective on female sexuality while simultaneously uses social realism to represent the class struggle of a single mother and her daughters. One of the primary questions regarding the representation of sexuality concerns the filmic techniques used by Arnold to subvert the male gaze but also empower the female gaze.

Turning female sexuality into a spectacle is a topic that has been thoroughly discussed by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema". Her essay has been particularly important regarding the construction of the male gaze. As Mulvey pointed out, most filmic narratives place the male protagonist at the centre of action, while the female is characterized by her passivity. In Mulvey's words, the female is the image and the male the bearer of the gaze (Mulvey, 1975). The issues of pleasure and spectatorship remain critical in recent films and so does the question regarding how the male gaze can be subverted in them, especially by female directors.

On the other hand, Teresa De Lauretis noted that Mulvey only addressed mainstream film, while the challenge is "*to displace yet another couple of oppositional terms, mainstream and avant garde, by traversing the space between them and mapping it otherwise*" (De Lauretis, 1984: 59). According to that, the question concerning the representation of women in film should not be constrained by the binary between dominant and non-dominant cinema, with the first being linked to negative connotations, such as the passive female image and the active male gaze. Instead, it is this binary, as well as the gender binary, that should be contested to allow ourselves to imagine a new language of desire.

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Both Mulvey's theory on the gaze and De Lauretis' suggestion for a remapping of it are important for my focus on female desire in a non-Hollywood film. The reading I am suggesting examines how the male gaze is subverted particularly through the representation of the male character, Conor, as an object of female desire and scopophilia. At the same time, female sexuality is empowered as the woman becomes the bearer of the gaze, while the male gaze is cancelled.

Finally, while seemingly unrelated to sexuality, class also plays a role as another factor of oppression that brings intersectionality on the surface. According to Stella Hockenhull, Arnold manages that by transforming the "outsider" woman's drama into a realist narrative (Hockenhull, 2017: 143). In this context, Arnold's other films – such as *American Honey* (2016) that refers to gender, class and race – will also be important for the analysis, since they allow a broader look at the director's filmic thematics and techniques.

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