Cinematic Language under the Female Gaze: A Case Study of Li Yu

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Abstract: This paper aims to discover the concept of the 'female gaze' in the movie Lost in Beijing by Li Yu. The 'female gaze' is a film theory that is in opposition to the 'male gaze,' which is a way of viewing women as sexual beings and not as complex people. This paper posits that Li Yu uses the 'female gaze' as a post-modernist technique to focus on the emotional and psychological aspects of the female characters, thus overturning the established Patriarchal gender norms and bringing to the fore the issues of gender inequality in contemporary Chinese society. Certain filming approaches, including those that include close ups and reflective shots, affect the experience of the film's main subject, who are women. The research also reviews the variance between the 'male gaze' and the 'female gaze' in movies, pointing out that the former is much more forthright and authentic in its portrayal of women. Lastly, the paper considers the further developments of the concept of the 'female gaze' and possibilities to transform the film industry from the perspective of the female representation.

Keywords: Female Gaze, Gender Inequality, Li Yu, Lost in Beijing.

1. Introduction

This paper will explore how the "female gaze" concept is used in the film Lost in Beijing, directed by Li Yu. The lens of women known as the 'female gaze' interprets stories, feelings, thoughts, and perspectives. Unlike what detractors define as the 'male gaze', this perspective treats women as actual people with unique viewpoints, instead of as objects. The key argument is that Li Yu adopts the 'female gaze' in Lost in Beijing to reveal the emotional and psychological qualities of the two female protagonists. This research intends to expose the essential role of 'female gaze' in critiquing and analyzing the continuing problem of gender inequality in Chinese society through an analysis of Li Yu's directing strategies surrounding gender stereotypes in China. To enhance film viewers' experience of the core of the female characters' stories, Li Yu applies cinematic strategies including mise-en-scene, montage, close-up shots, and scenes that unveil the principal characters' thoughts.

2. Literary Review

In film theory, the 'female gaze' refers to representation of women in film, along with the narratives derived from a feminine perspective. The theory of 'male gaze' by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey provoked a reaction that led to its development. The idea of 'the male gaze' is one of how women are

presented in films purely for the sexual gratification of men. On the other hand, the 'female gaze' portrays women as equally capable of having agency, subjectivity and their own point of view.

To understand the "female gaze," it's important to first look at the "male gaze." Laura Mulvey discussed this concept in her 1975 essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.' She stated that the movies of Hollywood's classical period are male gaze movies, which reduce women to objects of sexual desire and assign men the role of active subjects who look. This make female characters in the movies to be seen rather than being active characters in the movies [1].

Far from just being an angle about how women are represented in media, it is an angle about how the viewers are trained to perceive the world through the male lens. For example, in many films of the classical period, a woman's body might be erotically framed, turned into spectacle meant to attract the male gaze. This can cause the female viewers to lack the point of reference with the characters on screen since most of the women are portrayed in manners that the females do not experience.

The "female gaze" is a way of storytelling that focuses on women's perspectives, correcting the issues presented by the "male gaze." Hence, as opposed to objectifying female objectification, the 'female gaze' is one in which women are active subjects with complex personalities. It centers their feelings, ideas and perceptions, empowering them with agency that is often absent in films made from the 'masculine' perspective [2].

An example of the "female gaze" lies in how a camera might linger on a woman's face to portray her feelings, as opposed to her exterior. It is also true in movies whose plot focuses on the life of a woman and how she perceives things and events, unlike classic movies that have women as sidekicks to the heroes. In other words, the so-called 'female gaze' is all about telling the stories that are important to women and presenting them as genuine people with interior lives.

One strong example of the 'female gaze' in practice is the movie Portrait of a Lady on Fire by Céline Sciamma. The story is set up in the two women's point-of-view, which is well captured in the cinematography. Unlike most romantic comedies where the characters portray sex objects, the camera explores their faces, the look of love, and simplicity of their love story. Thus, it is possible to observe the characters as real persons with their desires and needs, not simply sexual objects [3]. Another example is the director Lucrecia Martel who also employs what is known as the 'female gaze' to turn the conventional narrative on its head. Martel concentrates on the subjectivity of female characters and pays much attention to their intimacy; she prefers close-ups and depictions of the characters' daily routine to stress psychological and emotional experiences. It allows the viewer to empathize with the character and see the events through their eyes and not merely or primarily through a male-oriented perspective [2].

The "female gaze" significantly influences how stories are told and how audiences perceive female characters. Through the portrayal of women and their stories, the "female gaze" subverts women's roles in movies as set by the male gaze. It creates new opportunities for dramatic representation of women and for portraying their potential on the screen. The films where the 'female gaze' was employed reveal female characters in positions that are real life-like, for example, struggling with the issues of motherhood, relationships, or career. These films are supposed to be more touching for women because women can recognize their own lives and problems in them. Also, the 'feminine' point of view makes the male audience look at women differently, not only as sex objects but as people who also have something to say [4].

In *Lost in Beijing*, director Li Yu uses the "female gaze" to tell a story centered on her female characters' emotional and psychological experiences. The film has a subversive view of the male gaze because it depicts a woman's suffering in modern society, especially in China. Li Yu employs the use of close-up and reflective shots that enable the audience to get acquainted with the inner self of the females, and as a result, their experiences become the core of the movie. It also gives a true

representation of women and, at the same time, subverts the powers that relegate them to the background due to social norms [5].

3. How the "Female Gaze" is Used in Lost in Beijing

Li Yu's use of camera language in *Lost in Beijing* plays a crucial role in expressing the "female gaze." From the camera movement, the positioning, and the rhythm of the shots, the audience is emotionally immersed in the female characters. For instance, in the scenes where Liu Pingguo is sexually harassed by her boss, Lin Dong, close-up shots are taken of her face, showing her fear, confusion, and pain. Finally, the close-up lets the viewers grasp Liu's inner state and makes her more than a simple victim – she becomes a unique character with a storyline of her own [5].

Li Yu also uses reflective shots, for example, when Wang Mei looks in the mirror in her car, as a sign of the inner turmoil of her characters. The camera pans to Wang Mei's mirror to depict her struggle as well as the psychological effect of her husband's betrayal on her. This technique engages the audience in a position of feeling the hopelessness of her situation, like Wang Mei, thus getting into her feeling realm [6].

Thus, Li Yu successfully creates a rhythm of stationary and mobile camera work that corresponds to the character's emotions. Static shots are employed when the character is thinking or sad so that the audience can contemplate, too. On the other hand, complicated and fast-moving camera movements are used during scenes of tension and conflict because the main characters' lives are depicted as chaotic. It is essential to mention that this approach helps to create the audience's empathy for the characters, which is one of the main features of the ''female gaze'' [7].

3.1. Subversion of the Male Gaze

Unlike most male gaze, Li Yu does not sexually objectify women, but at the same time, she does internalize her female characters. In many movies directed at males, female characters are depicted in such a way that they are only for show or sex. *Lost in Beijing*, on the other hand, sees its director, Li Yu, take this interest to another level and widen the area of the viewers' concern to the characters' affective-psychological domains.

For instance, when Liu Pingguo is being exploited, the camera does not objectify her or turn her into a sexual object. But it stays close to her face to map the emotional response to the violation she has been subjected to. Analyzing the show's action this way makes the audience not only see her pain and the relations of power that regulate her but also view her as not only a mere violated body. Thus, the view that is directed to her inwardness makes the viewer to confront her as a complete character [8].

Likewise, in scenes where Wang Mei is involved, and especially in the sequence where she is in the midst of conflict and dilemma, the camera focuses on her face. These shots are not shots of her to make her sexy; the shots add stress to her emotions, on the movie's agenda of presenting the female perspective. Li Yu refuses to turn the characters into sexual objects by focusing on their feelings rather than their looks, and thus constructs a women-oriented movie, which is rarely seen in male-centered films [9].

3.2. Contrasting with Male-Gaze Dominated Films

Lost in Beijing contrasts sharply with films dominated by the male gaze, where women are often portrayed in ways that prioritize their physical attributes and sexual appeal. In many male-directed films, female characters are introduced with shots that emphasize their bodies, often sexualizing them or reducing them to secondary roles. These films typically focus on male protagonists, with female characters as mere accessories to the male lead's journey.

For example, in most Hollywood films, women are objectified by giving slow and attractive angles at their bodies to men. In most cases, these characters are denied dimensionality and growth beyond what is expected of them: to support the male protagonist or to be an object of affection. This leads to poor characterization and the continuation of stereotype portrayal in TV dramas.

On the contrary, *Lost in Beijing* features female characters who are more than just the objects of men's affection or victims of domestic abuse. This is especially seen in Li Yu's use of the 'female gaze' where the viewers are presented with the world from the perspective of the women, with much emphasis on the characters' emotions and psychological well-being. This leads to a somewhat more detailed, and therefore more accurate, representation of women.

For example, Liu Pingguo's character is portrayed as a fully thinking person with her objectives and plans. The movie depicts her manner of dealing with exploitation, her interaction with her husband, and her efforts to get a better life in a tough environment. Depth of this kind is not typical of male-gaze movies, where women are usually likely to be given a raw deal.

Furthermore, the movie *Lost in Beijing* depicts such issues as prostitution and adultery, aiming at the demonstration of the effects of the actions on the women rather than at the use of the women as items of provocation. How some of the women captured on the camera respond emotionally suggests that the film is narrated from a woman's perspective [10].

Consequently, *Lost in Beijing* proves that the 'female gaze paints a much more realistic image of women in film. As it concerns such movies, the term 'the female gaze' constructs a much more refined and polite female story that does not contain the masculinist sexualization of women. It not only subverts the gender roles portrayed in films but also offers the audience a further angle in viewing women in film.

4. Impact and Implications

Applying the 'female gaze' in '*Lost in Beijing'* comes with several repercussions regarding audience reception and reception of female characters in the picture. In this way, Li Yu creates the opportunity to identify with women and their psychological problems, which are usually not paid attention to in mainstream filmmaking. This approach questions the viewers and forces them to look at women as subjects rather than mere objects or mere figures in the background [5].

Furthermore, the 'female gaze' in *Lost in Beijing* subverts existing power relations, especially in Chinese society of the present day. Thus, the movie teaches the audience the problems, which exist in society and influence women as sexual objects and discriminated persons. This not only enriches the story but also puts the movie in a category of a social reform instrument [6].

In this respect, the success of such movies as *Lost in Beijing* in using the "female gaze" also has a wider significance for cinematographic practice. It creates a space for other storytelling than the male-dominated one, where women's roles and opinions are crucial. It also has the power to potentially redefine the processes of creating and consuming movies and, therefore, alter the film industry's diverse and inclusive landscape [7].

All in all, the significance of Lost in Beijing is in the fact that it may encourage future filmmakers to follow the trail of the 'female gaze'. In this way, this approach can help expand the range of stories and contribute to the change in culture so that women's experiences will be valued. It is therefore noteworthy that by giving space to real female experiences, the movie industry can be useful in addressing gender issues and helping change the public's perception of women. The concept of the 'feminine look' transcends the movie context but has a major impact on the concepts of gender roles in different spheres. This shift has the potential to and rewire stereotyped perceptions thus helping to continue the fight for gender equality. Therefore, films like Lost in Beijing are not only artistic creations, but also the tools that can turn the film industry and the society's perception of gender roles.

5.   Conclusion

As a high school girl sincerely interested in values such as freedom of speech, independence, and gender equality, the subject of the 'female gaze' in *Lost in Beijing* is particularly meaningful to me. The film not only depicts the dramatic and psychological experiences of women but also asserts that women must have the right to express themselves. It disputes established narratives by claiming that women's voices are necessary for achieving a balanced broader human perspective. I believe that cinema ought to function as a strong societal tool, representing the views of the unrepresented, especially the marginalized. The emergence of the 'female gaze' in the works of directors like Li Yu inspires young women like me to continue advocating for the creation of films that genuinely reflect women's experiences and perspectives. In a society that still perpetuates gender inequalities, the 'female gaze' offers a crucial means of fostering greater understanding and ultimately driving social transformation.

This study has shown that *Lost in Beijing* serves as an exemplary case of how the 'female gaze' can be employed to present women's stories with greater authenticity and sensitivity. Cultural analysis of China and its gender stereotype images are shown by Li Yu with the help of mise-en-scène and montage. As for the method, this research focuses on the female gaze as a form of reversing the patriarchal clichés and the requirement for the variety in the movies.

However, this study has endeavored to unfold how the 'female gaze' works in *Lost in Beijing*. Yet, there are implications. For example, the analysis was largely limited to the psychological and emotional aspects of the female characters, while the subsequent research can add the investigation of the 'female gaze' in connection with other factors, including class, age, and ethnicity. In addition, the study focused on only one film; future research may consider analyzing more films to discover how 'the female gaze' works in other cultures and genres.

In conclusion, the 'female gaze' represents a significant force in the ongoing development of the film industry. Integrating women's perspectives and experiences in film boosts storytelling and plays an important role in building a more just and inclusive society. As the film industry continues to evolve, the 'female gaze' will remain a critical factor in shaping the stories that reflect the diverse realities of women's lives.

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