

Revenge, Attachment and Nameless: Investigating Male Gaze in Lost in the Star Through Gender Construction Theory

Jingyi Liu^{1,a,*}

¹*English and Communication Department, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Yuk Choi Road, Yau Tsim Mong district of Kowloon, Hong Kong, 999077, China*

a. 21098608d@connect.polyu.hk

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Gender has always been a popular topic of discussion. According to numerous studies on the subject of gender, Women have historically been marginalised. Film, as a tool to influence people's ideologies, will greatly construct gender relations. However, many film studies have been done on how gender shapes women's roles, yet it has been determined that the majority of them concentrate on women in the 20th century, which may produce a disconnection with today's society. This study selects three female characters from the 2023 domestic suspense film *Lost in the Star*, which focuses on the new era of women in the 21st century and is controversial. Using Simone de Beauvoir's theory of social construction and the Mako Mori test, this study will investigate whether the 21st-century mass media's construction of women still implies the male gaze. This study reveals that the mass media still implicitly conceals the male gaze in today's culture. Gender studies should continually monitor cutting-edge publications and examine how gender views are evolving over time. Based on this, gender studies should continue to plough deeper and deeper into affirmative work.

Keywords: feminism, film analysis, male gaze, gender construction

1. Introduction

Gender is a conventional basis of everyday life. This coincides with the theory of gender constructs. Numerous studies have demonstrated the marginalisation of women. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* suggests that women are a subordinate gender, a "non-male group" with men as a reference point [1]. This inequality is mainly reflected in the division between the primary and secondary gender positions. According to Beauvoir's theory of the second sex, males are in the dominant gender position, and females are in the secondary one. This highlights the original gender inequality. Societies constructed on gender inequality result in unequal roles.

The unequal othering of the higher group over the lower group is being concealed in messages and discourses, shaping society and people's ideologies. As a mass media, the film has a crucial role in shaping people's values. Films shape people's values and define gender relations. Therefore, films as an important medium for shaping the values of the public is worth studying. Focusing on the recent timeframe (2019-2023), this research compiles domestic and international film studies on gender construction and finds that research in related fields mostly focuses on women's image in the 20th century and earlier, finding that previous research in this area mostly focuses on women in the 20th

century. This research chooses the three female characters in the 2023 Chinese suspense film *Lost in the Star* to try to compensate for the time lag in domestic research in related fields. Released in 2023, this film has the novelty of reflecting the current time context. The film has been controversial since its broadcast and is debatable. Currently, there is no analysis of this film in the gender field. This research will use Simone de Beauvoir's social construction theory, taking the Mako Mori test as the criterion to observe whether the construction of women in mass media in the 21st century still imply the subordination to male through textual analysis.

2. Theoretical Statement

2.1. Gender-Construction Theory

Gender construct theory is first formalised by Simone de Beauvoir [1]. It challenges the traditional gender concepts, arguing that gender cannot be equated with biological differences but should encompass social conditions [2]. Traditional gender concepts are based on biological determinism. It assumes that people are classified as male and female based on biological characteristics. The traditional conception focuses on the biological differences between genders, leading to inherent gender inequality. Gender construction is an emerging theory, making an attack on the one-dimensional perspective of the traditional gender conception. Beauvoir suggested that "one is not born a woman, but becomes one" [1]. According to Nancy Chodorow, gender refers to the set of responses infants have from their parents, i.e. gender is the socially stimulated development of people's feminised and masculinised personalities [3]. From the above, it can be seen that gender construction theory emphasises a two-way construction of society and gender. Social factors construct gender, and gender, in turn, builds social roles. The film, as a microcosm of real society, portrays the construction of characters that can reflect the underlying social ideology.

2.2. Male Gaze

Broadly speaking, the male gaze is a way of depicting women to satisfy male viewers' desire for dominance. Gender gaze is explained in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* [4]. Mulvey mentions that the male gaze originates from patriarchal ideology, suggesting that gender inequality links asymmetries of social and political power, reflected in cinema as a controlling social force. It is a social construction of men through discourse [4]. Sartre also refers to "gaze" in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre emphasises the subjective power conflict behind the gaze. He also suggests that the essence of this power imbalance is to see people as an object rather than as a person [5]. According to Foucault, gaze is a component of power [6]. Gaze is not simply looking but is a discipline that carries power and desire. This analysis extracts the commonalities in the different theories of male gaze and summarises it as the male's seizure of female power through objectifying women. This study will adopt Laura Mulvey's gaze theory as the main focus, supplemented by other gaze theories, to analyse the gender construction in *Lost in the Star*. As the concept of gaze is derived from film analysis, it is applicable to the analysis of power in films.

3. Analysis

The male gaze has mostly focused on erotic scenes. However, Mulvey emphasises that sexiness is not a necessary prerequisite for female characters to be gazed at [4]. What is important is that she acts for the male to achieve self-growth. The Mako Mori test is often used to judge whether a film has achieved gender equality. Its main criterion is whether a film's female characters' plot curves reflect women's independent growth without attaching to male characters. Thus, the Mako Mori test is suitable for detecting whether a film contains an implied male gaze. The Mako Mori test is from

Guillermo del Toro's *Pacific Rim* (2013). This test consists of three metrics: There is at least one female character, the female characters have independent plot curves, and the female characters' plots do not exist to support the male characters [7].

This section will examine the role image and behavioural logic of the three main female characters, Shen Man, LI Muzi and Fake LI Muzi, to explore whether the female characters are full and independent or attached to the male characters. Based on this, this section will analyse whether the female characterisation of the film implies the male gaze.

3.1. Revenge-Shenman

SHEN Man can be considered the real heroine of this film. In the early stage, SHEN Man and HE Fei work together to investigate the truth of LI Muzi's disappearance; in the later stage, the truth is revealed, and SHEN Man becomes the manipulator of the whole game. She orchestrates a great drama to reveal the truth of LI Muzi's disappearance, inducing HE Fei to confess his crime. She seems to be a successful revenge woman. However, it is worth considering whether SHEN Man's "anti-traditional" construction has any limiting factor given by the director. She is portrayed as a short-haired, competent, unisex dresser with a motorbike. According to Byrnes et al., elements such as alcoholism, drug abuse, gambling and driving are regarded as male stereotypes [8]. The director seems to emphasise SHEN Man's role as a revengeful woman by making her image "anti-traditional". However, the film's presentation of "anti-traditional" is rather shallow. SHEN Man carries these labels almost deliberately. The director shows SHEN Man's liberation from the female stereotype and her heroic attributes by making her wear masculine labels. Such an operation will implant in the audience the ideology that "masculinity is the determining factor of heroic attributes", deepening the patriarchal ideology.

Besides appearance, SHEN Man also has a masculine tendency in her personality. SHEN Man carries the male ethnic label. The masculine ethic is manifested in resolute attitudes and the ability to analyse abstract situations, among other things [9]. SHEN Man's lawyer status and her aggressiveness echo the masculine ethic, which may be pandering to the definition of male leadership. Due and Alvesson argue that masculine ethics are seen as an exclusionary principle. Women are excluded by this principle; they need to possess masculine qualities to gain a leadership position [9]. The director may want to represent a breakthrough in the traditional female image, but this effort exactly shows women's vulnerability. SHEN Man's need to wear male labels in order to take on the role of a "heroine" may be a reaffirmation of male sovereignty.

SHEN Man's plot construction still reflects a concession to male sovereignty. Firstly, SHEN Man, the film's truly heroic heroine, is given a minimal body of lines, even less than the supporting character. For the first two-thirds of the film, HE Fei is the absolute protagonist. Audiences are forced to follow HE Fei's male perspective of the story. HE Fei not only occupies a larger amount of narrative time and line volume but also represents the film's viewing subject and viewed object. HE Fei dominates the visual presentation and, to some extent, dominates the audience's identification. In this way, this film lays down male discourse power. Female characters are still sidelined. Secondly, SHEN Man's behaviour demonstrates the imbalance of the film's gender construction. When SHEN Man finally goes to the prison to face HE Fei, she says: "You've lost the person who loves you the most in this world." It is from the perspective of the murderer to inform the murderer of his loss rather than from the perspective of the victim to hiss in anger: "You killed my closest friend." Such misalignment of cognitive subjects indicates the imbalanced gender construction. At the end of this film, SHEN Man's behaviour still serves the male. SHEN Man's revenge finally returns to the patriarchal society's precepts on women: procreation.

3.2. Attachment - LI Muzi

LI Muzi is a very typical image of a “wifelet”, as described by Sylvia Harvey [10]. In the film, family is the place where LI Muzi mostly appears. The film does not contain any scenes about LI Muzi fighting for her job; instead, it emphasises LI Muzi’s family background and her marriage to HE Fei. This narrative corresponds to the “wifelet” image of women’s bonding with families. This type of female figure has been a category since the 1940-1950 black-and-white film era. For a long time, male labelling of such women as “ideal women” implies that men tie women to family and procreation. It is worth noting that LI Muzi’s image is in aphasia in the film. The person who lost and disappeared, just like the film’s title “*Lost in the Star*” mentioned, is LI Muzi, and she is not even in the stills. LI Muzi is already dead at the beginning. The audience has no access to the real LI Muzi, and all the stories about LI Muzi and her image come from the descriptions of other characters, especially HE Fei. All the footage of LI Muzi exists in the imagination of SHEN Man and HE Fei. All her images are entirely constructed by other characters. Aphasia refers to women becoming virtual and imaginary “others” under patriarchal oppression [11]. They are deprived of the right to speak and are silenced as “marginalised” and “others”. Women lose their ability to speak under suppression and are in aphasia. Thus, male characters are able to arbitrarily construct LI Muzi. In the film, the discourse power between males and females is unequal. This is manifested, on the one hand, in the disappearance of LI Muzi. On the other hand, even in HE Fei’s description, LI Muzi has no discourse power. Under HE Fei’s description, LI Muzi is silent. There is very little of LI Muzi’s line in the film, and the communication between LI Muzi and HE Fei is basically dominated by HE Fei. This discourse imbalance further reinforces LI Muzi’s vulnerable position. Her aphasia prevents her from speaking out. She is not even able to say “divorce” as a request for escape. The compulsory control of the male-dominated society and the forced moulding of the male discourse make LI Muzi a speechless “ideal woman”. According to Beauvoir, this elevation of women to “goddesses” is actually another form of objectification towards women [1]. LI Muzi is gentle and submissive, obeying her boyfriend almost for everything, inevitably becoming man’s tool to struggle in the patriarchal society.

LI Muzi’s background setting also implicitly facilitates male characterisation. According to Lieberman, passivity, victimisation, and beauty are necessary prerequisites for marriage and wealth in the classic fairy tale [12]. LI Muzi is rich and beautiful; these are the exact reasons why HE Fei wants to marry her. In the film, LI Muzi spends most of her time at home without her independent work, whereas HE Fei, as a lower-class person, struggles for money. This narrative contrast, on the one hand, subconsciously binds LI Muzi to her family, and on the other hand, by erasing LI Muzi’s subjectivity and uniqueness, the film flattens LI Muzi into labels such as “wealthy” and “high class”, which is the representation of objectification. HE Fei does not necessarily want LI Muzi. For HE Fei, LI Muzi is just a tool for him to get higher class and satisfy his vanity, not an independent woman who should be respected. The film portrays LI Muzi as a gentle, passive woman who even suffers from stress-trauma syndrome after the car accident. These constructs cause LI Muzi to actively cede dominance, and the combination of labels like rich, beautiful, and passive form HE Fei’s motivation to kill his wife. LI Muzi’s constructs make HE Fei’s behaviour more logical while making HE Fei’s controlling nature more impactful. Therefore, the construction of LI Muzi is dependent on males, reflecting the objectification of women and the male’s struggle for dominance. The construction of this female character embodies the male gaze.

3.3. Nameless-Fake LI Muzi

Fake LI Muzi is a typical femme fatale. On the screen, Fake LI Muzi is sexy and alluring, initially teasing HE Fei with the image of a bad woman. Femme fatale is generally contrasted with the image of a wifelet. Fake LI Muzi forms this contrast with the real LI Muzi. Fake LI Muzi is a beautiful

woman in the antithetical sense, while real LI Muzi is an ideal woman in the traditional sense. The role of the bad woman may be to undermine other women. Femme fatale as a cast of post-war male anxiety about gender role shifts. In the world wars of the early 1940s, while the men were struggling on the battlefields, women were at home playing male roles [13]. When men returned home, they would be horrified to find their place had been taken by a woman. Out of this fear, men, therefore, construct the image of women through language. Such construction, on the one hand, sexualises females as sexy objects that satisfy the male gaze, and on the other hand, the female fatale is described as “dead” in order to undermine the diminution of men’s status. The diminishment of Fake LI Muzi’s image is mainly reflected in her eroticisation and anonymisation.

The film fully reflects the sensuality of the fake LI Muzi. The male gaze involves what Lacan calls “voyeurism” and “the pleasure of looking”, i.e., the aesthetic pleasure and the sexual pleasure derived from gazing at someone or something. In order to satisfy the sexual pleasure of the male viewer, the female character is eroticised in two ways: as an object of desire for film characters and as an object of sexual desire for the male viewer. By portraying women as passive recipients under the active gaze of the male viewer, the film narrative constructs male dominance and female passivity, providing a foundation for the patriarchal system. In *Lost in the Star*, the characterisation of Fake LI Muzi profoundly embodies the male gaze, defying the Mako Mori Test. *Pacific Rim*, the source of the Mako Mori Test, is a good example of positive male gaze rejection [7]. The female character Mori never exhibits any eroticism, no undressing, fawning or flirting with men. Fake LI Muzi is the opposite. Fake LI Muzi is hot and flirtatious. The film frequently shows her seducing He Fei and showing off her body. The director even sets up a redundant beach dinner scene to show Fake LI Muzi flirting with HE Fei. These erotic scenes do not help Fake LI Muzi’s personal growth. She is an objectified product of the director’s pandering to the male perspective.

Nullification is a term used in feminist theology. Nullification refers to the dissolution of women’s images, voices, and status in patriarchal cultures. As something unique to human society, naming can reflect the ideology of society [14]. Naming gives people the power to define to distinguish between the “naming subject” and the “named object”. In *Lost in the Star*, the fake LI Muzi is never given a name. This female figure is referred to in the film and even on search pages as “Fake LI Muzi”. This is not a real name, but it establishes the sublime sovereignty of true LI Muzi and further suggests that women should be tied to their families. Being “nameless” deprives the character of her subjectivity and dissolves her uniqueness as an individual. Fake LI Muzi is reduced to an empty reference of “a vengeful woman”. Her behaviour logic is very weak: it is all because she hates the scummy man. By rationalising this thin logic, the film elevates it to become the reason why all the female characters in the film unite to fight against HE Fei and further flattens the main female characters into the label of “vengeful woman who hates scum”. The namelessness of Fake LI Muzi is magnified by the flattening of all the females in the film, and the logic of her hollow behaviour is thus generalised to all females. Such flattening that deprives the other of subjective initiative and individuality is the manifestation of objectification. This film objectifies women as labels through narrative. This objectification can satisfy the male viewer’s pleasure of consolidating dominance. The male gaze refers to men gaining dominance by objectifying women. Nameless makes the fake LI Muzi objectified into a label, embodying the power oppression from men and implying the male gaze.

4. Conclusion

This research adopts a gender-constructed perspective to study the behavioural logic of the three main female characters in *Lost in the Star* and concludes that even in today’s society, the ideology of the male dominant still exists in the mass media. By constructing flat female character images, *Lost in the Star* builds up an anti-female image of He Fei, further objectifying the female character group into a one-dimensional group of “vengeful women”. This operation deprives women of their

subjectivity and individuality. Due to the limitation of space, this research has only selected a single material as the study object. Therefore the conclusions of the research may not be universally applicable. Even today, there are still only a few films with women as narrative subjects. Men still occupy the narrative discourse in various ways. Gender studies should continue to follow up on frontier texts, explore the changes in gender ideology under contemporary development, based on this, continue to make profound efforts in affirmative action work.

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