The Worst Person in the World and Postmodern Feminism

Wanting Zhou[1,a,*]

[1]*Savannah College of Art and Design, 522 Indian Street, Savannah, United States*
a. wazhou20@student.scad.edu
*corresponding author

Abstract: The movie *The Worst Person in the World (2021),* takes place in Oslo and revolves around a woman named Julie. She is in her late twenties and finds herself caught in a cycle of indecision. She is unable to find a career or a relationship that fulfills her self-worth. The film primarily revolves around the character of the female protagonist, Julie, with the storyline and character development centered on her. Renate Reinsve, who plays the lead role, received the Best Actress award at the Cannes Film Festival for her performance in this movie. These years, with the influence of the #MeToo movement, for some viewers, this film may be considered one of the representative works of feminism in cinema. From the character design, cinematography, and references to postmodern feminism in the film, it is indeed a movie that aligns with the principles of postmodern feminism. However, it's important to note that the film's creative team is predominantly male, and postmodern feminism itself contains inherent theoretical contradictions. Therefore, from an objective standpoint, this film cannot be classified as a feminist movie.

Keywords: film studies, gender studies, female gaze, feminism, postmodern feminism

1.   Introduction

The Worst Person in the World (2021) is a romantic comedy film directed by Joachim Trier. The film follows the story of Julie since she went to college. Throughout the movie, Julie constantly changes her career path and switches between boyfriends and lovers, driven by her passionate impulses. After she meets Aksel, a comic book artist fifteen years older, her life takes a different turn. Aksel's rational and mature demeanour instantly captivates Julie, leading her to fall in love with him and eventually move in together. After that, Julie attempts to integrate herself into Aksel's family and circle of friends. However, her deep-seated fear of childbirth and stagnation in her career lead to profound self-doubt. Moreover, due to her father's absence throughout her life, she struggles with a low sense of self-worth, constantly seeking validation and emotional security from others while also craving recognition. The stark contrast between Julie and Aksel in terms of their careers and life stages plunges Julie into a sense of inferiority. Then, when Julie encounters the kind and easygoing young man, Eivind, the extinguished flame of hope within her is reignited. At least she can prove her worth by harnessing her feminine charm. However, this phase of contentment is short-lived as Julie becomes disenchanted with Eivind's shallow knowledge and understanding of academic and intellectual matters. She begins to yearn for the days she spent with Aksel. However, her world is suddenly shattered when she learns that Aksel has reached the advanced stages of cancer with little time left.

As she spends Aksel's final moments with him, Julie gradually contemplates her own life. She starts to search for her true self and begins to live with sincerity [1].

The choice of this film as an analytical case study for feminism in cinema stems from the fact that previous film reviews and analyses have predominantly focused on discussions about films made by women that feature female protagonists. There has been limited exploration of whether men can effectively create films that can be considered feminist in their content. Therefore, "The Worst Person in the World," as a rare example of a film with an all-male creative team that places a female character at the forefront, raises questions about its potential and qualifications as a feminist film.

In this context, this paper will delve into two primary arguments: the portrayal and design of characters in the film and the connection between the film and feminist theory. These arguments will serve as the basis for exploring whether this film has the potential to be considered a feminist movie, prompting critical analysis and contemplation.

2. Analysis

2.1. Character Analysis in the Film

2.1.1. Non-Male Gaze Character Portrayals

Film theorist Claire Johnston, in her essay "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema", points out that certain films featuring female characters still adhere to the core principles of the male gaze and phallocentrism in their character and visual designs. As a result, women become pseudo-centers in such films [2].

In this movie, even though the creators are male, the design of the male characters shows that there are no overly masculine male characters in the movie. Aksel, the lead male character, is a cartoonist who is slender, fair-skinned, of medium height, with a melancholic temperament and even a hint of weakness. From the image, he is not a very masculine and heroic man. In terms of his relationship with the heroine, the most important reason for Julie to be attracted to him is that he is extremely talented, knowledgeable, insightful, good at analysing and summarising, and has a leading and guiding role for the heroine. As for Eivind, in terms of appearance, he is tall and handsome, gentle and considerate, without strong ambitions, preferring to lead a quiet and content life. Because of his unassuming demeanor, he could potentially be overshadowed by a female partner. Upon analysing their relationship, Julie acknowledges him for his gentleness, capacity to listen attentively, and readiness to grant space and opportunities for her to display her personal charm. From this evaluation, it can be inferred that in crafting male characters, the creators did not rely on phallocentrism as the foundation for their character development.

As for the main character, Julie is portrayed as a young woman approaching her thirties. Her outfits predominantly lean towards casual comfort, with low colour saturation and simple styles. She typically wears t-shirts, athletic pants, or casual trousers. Clothing choices made by Julie do not prioritise sexual suggestion, sensuality, or the deliberate accentuation of feminine curves. She lacks grand ambitions and does not possess extraordinary courage or ambition. She seeks happiness much like an ordinary person and grapples with the meaning of her own existence. She does not alter her thoughts, interests, outward appearance, or physique to cater to male preferences; instead, all her decisions are based on her own needs. It is evident that the creators did not forcefully apply phallocentrism to the female lead's character but rather portrayed an ordinary, everyday person's joys and sorrows on screen, based on the image of a real woman. Therefore, in the character's design, this work did not employ the male gaze approach.

2.1.2. Shot Design Based on Characters

The male gaze in a film encompasses not only the visual design of the characters but also the presentation of the language of shots. Therefore, when examining the male gaze elements in this work, the language of shots is one of the key areas of focus. Despite ideological differences with the principles of second-wave feminism, the creative team has still adhered to the foundational logic of the female gaze theory based on Laura Mulvey in the application of cinematographic language. The male gaze's skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure unchallenged mainstream film and coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order [3]. The male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly to connote to be looked at-ness [4].

For instance, the initial interaction between Julie and Aksel serves as an illustrative case. This scene commences with a close-up shot of Julie, followed by a seamless transition to a close-up shot of Aksel. Within the frame, Julie is adorned in a black jacket and earrings, which aptly convey her vocation as a photographer. The shot then shifts to an introduction of Aksel's cat comic, providing a quick glimpse into his professional background. Subsequently, the scene switches to a medium close-up, two-shot of Julie and Aksel engaged in a lively conversation. Following this, the scene transitions to both Julie and Aksel sit on opposite sides of the bed after having sex, captured in a wide shot.

By examining this sequence of shots, it becomes apparent that the director chose not to establish their relationship in terms of who is the pursuer and who is pursued, avoiding any unequal or passive dynamics. Instead, the director opted for an equal and balanced flow of shots between Julie and Aksel. Their initial attraction and mutual crush develop naturally through shared interests and understanding. This approach aligns with what Benson referred to as the female gaze, characterised by an equal, inclusive, and empathetic perspective.

Joey Soloway is an American television creator, showrunner, director and writer. In Soloway's master class in TIFF in 2016, she explains the theory of the female gaze. The female gaze resembles a subjective camera striving to immerse itself within the protagonist, employing framing techniques to convey and elicit a sense of emotional engagement with the characters rather than mere observation [5].

In this film, the director skillfully utilises the subjective camera technique, employing a multitude of POV shots to convey Julie's perspective and how she perceives the world, providing a glimpse into how she sees others. For example, during Julie's initial visit to Aksel's family, the camera employs three distinct shooting techniques.

First, the camera follows Julie's footsteps from the front, simultaneously depicting her reaction to the new environment and allowing the audience to immerse themselves in this new setting through her perspective. This aligns with Soloway's key points regarding the female gaze [5]

Second, the camera captures a POV shot from the back of Julie, emphasising her silhouette. In this case, Julie's reactions serve as secondary information, while the primary focus is on presenting the new environment and new characters. It is worth to note that when shooting from Julie's back, the director pays significant attention to the camera's height. In these POV shots, the camera's height is typically not aligned with Julie's eye level but is instead determined by the eye level of the person being observed. This design becomes particularly noticeable when capturing scenes with children. The director opts for handheld shots, positioning the camera at the eye level of the children. Through this approach, the director aims to convey the rejection of subject-object relationships within the female gaze. The female gaze, as depicted in this film, avoids oppressive cinematographic language and advocates for an equal perspective, as discussed by Benson [4].

Thirdly, the handheld POV shot simulating Julie's perspective is noteworthy. In this particular scene, conventional POV shots from Julie's viewpoint are relatively scarce. Only one POV shot captures Julie's realisation of Aksel's affection for children, eliciting her sense of joy. This choice

serves dual objectives for the director. First, even though there are many people present, Julie's sole focus is on Aksel. Second, both the front-following and behind-following POV shots offer a broader view to showcase the environment and establish the roles of various characters. However, only the POV shot simulating Julie's perspective aligns more closely with her subjective gaze, strengthening the emotional connection between the visual content and Julie's feelings. Therefore, the director, through these three different POV techniques, prioritises what Julie is paying attention to in this scene and establishes an emotional connection. This approach aligns with Soloway's theory of the subject camera [5].

2.2. Exploration of Postmodern Feminism in the Film and Its Relationship with Mainstream Culture

2.2.1. Postmodern Feminism: Championing Bodily Autonomy and Resisting the Suppression of Diversity

From the perspective of postmodern feminism, a prominent aspect of the film is its advocacy for bodily autonomy. For instance, in the middle of the movie, during Julie and Aksel's cohabitation, Julie writes an article *Oral Sex in the Age of #MeToo*. The article primarily explores whether feminists can enjoy heterosexual intercourse, whether they can engage in masochistic practices, and whether feminism deprives women of their preferences and sexual experiences. These ideas align with the concept of bodily autonomy advocated by postmodern feminism. Postmodern feminist Annie Leclerc once wrote: "It will be necessary for me to speak of the joys of my sex, not the joys of my woman's soul, virtue or sensitivity, but the joy of every parts of her body" [6].

Postmodern feminists argue that women should not feel ashamed of sexual pleasure; instead, they should explore, experience, and enjoy it while creating new language to describe it. From this perspective, Julie believes that women should be able to enjoy oral sex, which aligns with certain aspects of postmodern feminist theory. Enjoying oral sex should also be a part of women's sexual freedom and should not be linked to the political aspect of feminism. What some proponents of feminism seem to advocate is, in fact, a form of suppression of body freedom. It appears that women who enjoy oral sex may be deemed unfit as feminists, criticised as morally guilty individuals, and labelled as supporters of the patriarchal system, ultimately becoming a source of shame for women. Such moral judgments continue to persist on the internet even today.

Furthermore, delving deeper into the reasons behind this phenomenon, postmodern feminist theory suggests that feminism, to some extent, has struggled to break free from oppressive power structures. It has often regarded power as something held by specific mechanisms and groups, while traditional feminist oppressive models are seen as essentialist and inherently "extreme, challenging, and uncomfortable." Postmodern feminism, in contrast, is viewed as a return to a more populist form of feminism. In this context, postmodern feminism aims to deconstruct rigid power structures and embraces a more inclusive and accessible form of women's empowerment [7]. Because postmodern feminism asserts that feminism should be diverse, it does not advocate for women to seek domination, nor does it promote uniformity of thought within women as a group. Traditional feminism often constructs gender differences within a framework of gender opposition, making it challenging to acknowledge and address the diversity within the women's group [8].

In the latter segment of the film, an interview program featuring Aksel is being watched by Julie at the gym on the television. The guests and hosts of this interview, both of whom hold feminist viewpoints, express concerns regarding Aksel's comics. They assert that Aksel's works could potentially induce physical discomfort in women who have endured experiences of incest, rape or harbour apprehensions related to men. They argue that his works could trigger their sensitive nerves [9]. On the other hand, Aksel expresses that creativity should be diverse and not constrained by the

demands of political correctness or the need for approval from feminist individuals. He believes art should allow everyone to express their multifaceted selves. As an artist, he argues that one should not feel compelled to censor thoughts and desires solely to prevent the sensitivities arising from gender opposition within feminism, even when these desires might be considered dark or taboo, regarded as uncomfortable by mainstream society, and potentially disconcerting to certain readers.

Based on this, the two feminists launched a fierce attack on Aksel in the recording studio. They initially argue that Aksel's work cannot be considered art; they believe it is merely a mockery by the privileged against the vulnerable. Furthermore, they strongly object to certain words Aksel uses, expressing anger and showing no willingness to listen rationally to his response and the reasons behind it. In this scene, the two feminists seek to gain control of the conversation by outnumbering Aksel and forcing him to accept their statements and criticisms. They have no interest in understanding Aksel's explanations; they simply want to pass moral judgment unilaterally. This attempt to politicise art and exert power to suppress the other party is one of the forms of resistance to traditional feminism by postmodern feminism. Moreover, how these two feminists instinctively use confrontational and suppressive attitudes in their critique of Aksel's ideas and beliefs as representatives of the gender-opposite group also highlights the traditional feminist deficiency in embracing diversity and inclusivity.

2.2.2. Commercial Endeavors: The Integration of Feminism with Mainstream Culture

Feminist film critic Mary Ann Doane (1982) argued that female viewers can adopt one of three viewing strategies: they can adopt a male perspective ("fetishistic scopophilia"), they can excessively identify with female characters ("masochism"), or they can "disguise" themselves as one of the two [10].

Given the inevitability of such sexual arrangements, feminist media critics can only advocate for the creation of feminist films made by women (or, in other words, by feminist women). The implicit suggestion within this viewpoint is that women ought to resist and reject mainstream films and other cultural products displaying hostility towards them. In practical terms, this analysis either negates the enjoyment women experience from mainstream cinema (and popular culture in a broader sense) or interprets this enjoyment as indicative of false consciousness. Moreover, from a theoretical perspective, the theory itself remains unfalsifiable; it is challenging to establish or refute whether gender plays a decisive role in determining whether an individual's engagement with media is active or passive [11].

Based on this, most feminist films, like works of art, often lack commercial success, as the mainstream market and audiences may not readily embrace such artistic endeavours. Therefore, from a commercial perspective, the author believes that *The Worst Person in the World* deliberately considers visual stimulation and commercial value. For instance, the film categorises itself as a romantic comedy, utilising a genre easily accepted by audiences. Second, the film consistently showcases Oslo's scenic beauty and romantic ambience, creating a romantic and enchanting atmosphere through set design and mood enhancement. Third, scenes depict Julie and Eivind experiencing a mental connection at a party and later when they pause time and spend a night together, exhibiting a mise en scène that carefully portrays the hormonal rush of romance. For example, during the party, they gaze at each other while shrouded in smoke, symbolising their emotions and affection intertwining. When they spend the night together, the director chooses to film them in a park filled with flowers, bathed in the golden glow of the setting sun and the sweet backdrop of the flowerbeds. This creates a poignant portrayal of the lovers in a state of intense passion and deep connection. All of these elements are part of the director's skilful approach to commercial filmmaking without objectifying the female characters.

3. Conclusions

In terms of character development and cinematography, the creators did indeed adhere to principles that respect women, strive to empathise with the female characters' situations and emotions and reject the objectification of female characters. Female characters in the story design became genuine subjects rather than objectified others. Particularly from a cinematographic perspective, the entire film lacks close-up shots or imagery that sexualise female bodies or convey sexual innuendo, a rarity in films where the entire creative team is male.

In terms of the film's stance and perspectives, the creative team chose to incorporate the theories and viewpoints of postmodern feminism in several plot points throughout the film. From a female perspective, postmodern feminism indeed represents a reflection on and scepticism towards the first and second waves of feminism. Feminism's development has historically been built upon the knowledge theories and systems created and developed within a patriarchal society. Therefore, postmodern feminism, which questions the entire knowledge framework and maintains a healthy scepticism, raises concerns about whether feminism inherited power strategies from the patriarchal system. It seeks to create entirely new discourses and theoretical frameworks specific to women. These doubts about essentialism are an inevitable part of historical development, and one could argue that postmodern feminism is more of an attitude of scepticism toward everything rather than a distinct ideology.

For this film, given that the entire creative team consists of males, it becomes challenging to avoid suspicions that their choice to align with postmodern feminism as the theoretical basis for their work might be influenced by the male perspective. One could argue that these viewpoints align more with their interests as males. For example, when discussing Aksel's comics, from his perspective, resisting feminism is a natural choice because they question his work, attempt to limit his expression, and seek to politicise feminism to restrict freedom of speech and thought. However, from Julie's perspective, she seems to accept these viewpoints without much explanation or justification for why she supports postmodern feminist ideas. At this moment, although Julie is the protagonist, she becomes more like an object for expressing the creator's ideas, lacking agency. Of course, to some extent, the creators may have chosen to base their work on postmodern feminism as an entry point for commercial considerations. Postmodern feminism provides women's films with a broader, more diverse, and gentler way to present female themes, making it easier for such films to integrate with the production patterns of mainstream commercial cinema and achieve better economic value.

In summary, this film, created and directed by male creators, exhibits traces of influence from feminist theories in its themes and cinematography techniques, indicating an intention to appeal to female audiences. However, regarding the film's standpoint and values, it raises suspicions about the creators' motivation in adopting postmodern feminist ideas, whether it might be influenced by the male perspective inherent to that genre. Furthermore, while conveying postmodern feminist values, there is a suspicion of objectifying the female lead, treating her as a mere messenger or advocate. Therefore, this film can be considered an outstanding contribution to the realm of female-themed cinema; however, its ambiguous stance precludes its classification as a feminist film.

References

[1] Kiang, J. (2022). The Worst Person in the World. Sight & Sound, 32(3), 00374806.
[2] Johnston, C. (1999). Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema. In S. Thornham (Ed.), Feminist Film Theory (p. 3). Edinburgh University Press.
[3] Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. Screen, 16(4).
[4] Benson-Allott, C. (2021). What Is the Female Gaze? [Video]. Barnes Foundation. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QVi1yfs8N8

[5] Soloway, J. (2016). The Female Gaze [Master Class]. Toronto Film Festival. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20210414201009/https://www.toppleproductions.com/the-female-gaze

[6] Leclerc, A. (1974). Parole de femme. Bernard Grasset.

[7] Tasker, Y. (2007). Interrogating Post-Feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture. In D. Negra (Ed.), Duke University Press.

[8] De Lauretis, T. (1987). Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction. Series: Theories of Representation and Difference. Indiana University Press.

[9] Trier, J. (Director). (2021). The Worst Person in the World. Oslo Pictures.

[10] Doane, M. A. (1982). Film and the masquerade. Screen, 23(3–4), 74–87.

[11] Grossman, D. (2020). Feminism, Gender, and Popular Culture. In N. A. Naples & John Wiley & Sons (Eds.), Companion to Feminist Studies (pp. 327-328).