

The Heteronormative Gaze and Female Power in *The Batman*

Representations of queerness often employ features alternative to the heterosexual norms of attractiveness, such as a woman with masculine, short hair or men with feminizing makeup, as the sole indicators of queer identity. Adrienne Shaw argues that separating queerness into these binary identifiers and ignoring its inherent fluidity is a tool for selling to queer audiences under the guise of representation. Complete analysis of queer identity in *The Batman* requires analysis beyond these rigid, binary labels. The film plays with the presence of a literal male gaze alongside revealing costuming, power imbalances, and the lack of these rigid identity labels to encode a queerness in Catwoman that is both ambiguous and, at times, heteronormative. Unpacking the dichotomy of Catwoman's queerness against Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze elevates the film beyond the realm of entertainment and into a dialogue about "who gets to 'count'" in matters of queer representation (Shaw 19).

The Batman opens with a shot from The Riddler's perspective as he stares down at crowded streets through binoculars, forcing the viewer into a literal male gaze as the spectator of people below. The same shot from Batman's eyes later follows Catwoman through her apartment in a scene that draws heavily upon imagery reminiscent of Laura Mulvey's criticisms of male protagonists as voyeurs of their female counterparts. Batman first watches her comfort Annika, a woman Catwoman refers to as "baby", through shared, gentle touches. This is their sole physical interaction throughout the entire film, breaking the traditional representation of lesbians as figures "always depicted kissing, touching", or in other sexually charged positions (Gill 152).

Apart from the immediacy of a male spectator through the eyes of Batman, their exchange, unlike the latter half of the sequence, does not lean heavily into presentations of the male gaze as a mode of overt sexualization. Her sexualization begins the moment she crosses the apartment to her bedroom and begins to undress. The camera cuts back to a medium close up shot of Batman on a nearby rooftop, reminding the viewer of his

voyeuristic eyes on her bare skin. As she bends over to continue undressing, her face is blocked by the frame of her window. The camera pans down to focus on her feet and bare legs in what Mulvey refers to as the “fragmented body”, often “mediated through the eyes of the main male protagonist” (Mulvey 65). Fragmentation draws attention to individual parts of the woman’s body, treating her as a passive object to be looked over rather than a dynamic piece of an overarching narrative. The camera cuts to Batman a second time, then back to a higher angle of her window. The angle reveals a pegboard full of ropes and tools along her bedroom wall, further sexualizing her through association with BDSM iconography and dress in the form of her tight leather suit.

Oddly enough, this is also the first time she removes her long-haired wig to reveal her usual buzz cut underneath. Her sexualized image does not prioritize images of extreme femininity, but rather embraces a feature outside of traditional heterosexual norms of attractiveness through a short haircut. The sequence’s representation of Catwoman’s queer identity through her gentle interactions with a presumed female partner and buzzed hair dismantle the typical image of a lesbian couple constantly enraptured in sexual intimacy. Rather than being a stereotypical byproduct of her sexuality, Batman’s unwelcome gaze alongside the framing of Catwoman’s fragmented body are what sexualize her image.

The film continues to play with a literal male gaze in a later scene at the club alongside a subtle deconstruction of Batman’s cold, powerful disposition. Direct acknowledgement of Catwoman’s life under the male gaze and Batman’s cold orders illustrate the familiar image of a queer woman who has assimilated to her heteronormative society’s expectations out of necessity. The scene opens on a close-up of Catwoman’s eyes, the fragmented body, and is immediately followed by her expressing uncertainty about following his orders. Batman demands that she wear contacts fit with cameras and audio recording devices in order to further investigate leads on The Riddler’s murders, despite her vocalized displeasure. A sensual, low-angle shot depicts him towering over her and touching her face to inspect the newly inserted contacts. His emotionless, “looks good” statement about the lenses clashes with the wide-eyed desire written into Catwoman’s features. At first glance, his demanding and threatening disposition play into the domineering image of Batman as the omnipotent spectator of a sexualized female character. Framing Batman as romantically obtuse

against the longing stare of Catwoman transforms the moment into something far less sexually implicit.

As she walks into the club with Batman's eyes—the unseen, controlling male gaze of the contact lenses—in her head, four additional sets of male eyes on Catwoman are framed in white within the lenses. Batman takes notice of their wandering gazes and comments on their “problem with eye contact”, but still demands that she maintain eye contact for his investigation despite their shared discomfort. She stands directly in front of a dancer as he orders her around, blocking all but the unnamed woman's exposed backside in another instance of Mulvey's fragmented female body. Every woman in the sequence exists to serve or entertain a male character. Even Catwoman, driven by her desire to find Annika, moves under the orders of an unseen male figure. Everything, down to the movement of her eyes, the control of her female gaze, is corrupted by and subjected to male omnipotence.

Catwoman's methods of uncovering further information about leads on Annika's disappearance and The Riddler case are just as entrenched in sexualization as the male eyes that probe her body. On Batman's orders, she involves herself in a conversation with the DA and a group of his friends. She takes on a flirty disposition and slides her hand along his thigh, successfully producing information about both The Riddler and Annika in response to her touch. Her investigative abilities are reduced to her ability to seduce. Rosalind Gill refers to this same phenomenon in advertising as the “sexual objectification of women...repackaged as empowerment” (Gill 141). Batman's power outside of the physical is often connected to his intelligence and ability to problem solve, whereas Catwoman's power lies in her “ability to attract male attention” (Gill 149). Batman was able to deduce Catwoman's involvement with his case after seeing her with the penguin based on his own intelligence and investigative ability. Her investigative abilities are reduced to the desirability of her body and the power of seduction, rather than being a mark of her intelligence.

Batman's first confrontation with Catwoman initially appears to invalidate the idea that Catwoman's power is purely tied to her seduction rather than her strength. Directly after watching her undress in her apartment from the rooftop of an adjacent building, he follows her as she breaks into the home of the man who stole Annika's passport. Surprised, she holds her own in a fight against Batman for a few, fleeting

moments. He soon grabs her out of the air, her legs straddled around his torso, and slams her back into a table. He restrains her by her wrists as the camera cuts to a shot of him looking down at Catwoman as she squirms helplessly underneath him. Their audible breathing, grunts, and black masks suggestive of common BDSM iconography further entrench the scene into sexual implications that are in stark opposition to the characterization of Batman as an asexual figure. Though Batman's continued obliviousness to sexual implications and lack of defined romantic intentions suggest a platonic relationship between the pair, his aggressive handling of Catwoman obscures his image as an entirely asexual figure

His aggression within the scene extends beyond the physical and into his domineering assumption of her guilt. Batman only releases his hold on Catwoman after he's able to snatch Annika's passport from her hands. The woman that had initially sprung into coordinated attacks at the sight of an intruder now follows behind him like a puppy, grabbing helplessly for the passport that was ripped from her hands. He holds her by the wrists a second time as he analyzes Annika's passport, then launches into a half-baked accusation of murder. His immediate assumption of Catwoman's guilt mirrors the example of the misogynistic dichotomy of the morally sound "dominant male possessing money and power" versus a guilty woman (Mulvey 65). He uses her alleged guilt as a platform for exacting his physical strength over her, turning her into no more than the sexual object of his power.

A final physical restraint of Catwoman reiterates these established elements of male gaze alongside an invisible female gaze that defines the sexualization of Batman. Much like the heteronormative male gaze, the female gaze focuses on elements of masculinity rooted in patriarchal ideas of value. His sexualization does not rely on a literal woman's gaze, but rather these heteronormative frameworks of male strength and attractiveness. Typical male sexualization often relies on the "phallic muscularity", typically of the arms and chest, that define a man's power and sex appeal (Gill 145). Batman's effortless restraint of Catwoman both reaffirms the presence of a male gaze that requires her subordination and a female gaze that prioritizes oppressive male strength. Their fight sequence contradicts Batman's representation as sexually indifferent to establish the sexual tension that underscores their relationship

throughout the film. This tension, following the introduction of Catwoman's female "friend", defines much of the ambiguity surrounding her unlabeled sexuality.

A scene containing a single, brief kiss between the pair serves as the climax of the established tension and the encapsulation of the interplay between Catwoman's cryptic identity and the ever-present male gaze that aids in blurring it. They meet on a rooftop, calling back images of Batman's voyeuristic male gaze that first followed her through her apartment windows. Catwoman then divulges information about the passing of her "friend", clearly distraught by the news that she had been found strangled and dead in the back of a car. Batman leans into an emotionally ignorant response and belittles Annika, claiming she had been "involved with the wrong people" in a time of clear emotional stress for Catwoman. For the second time, he has placed himself above Catwoman as the unquestioned moral right and her, alongside the deceased Annika, as the guilty party. Rather than being a passive victim of his exercise of power as she had at the beginning of the film, she retorts and accuses Batman of being born into the money that allows him his position of power and self-assigned moral superiority. Her act of self-defense draws a clear line between the helpless, restrained Catwoman from their first interaction and her newly empowered characterization.

Instead of remaining in a position of power, Catwoman is immediately dethroned by Batman's use of masculine physicality to pull what he wants from her. Reasonably upset by his emotionally ignorant jabs at her dead partner, Catwoman objects to his line of questioning and attempts to storm off toward the elevator. Batman forcibly grabs her arm, pulls her over to him, and demands that she give him answers to his questions. Surprisingly, the once empowered Catwoman devolves into the male-gaze infested obedient woman he demands. As the film's narrative progresses, Catwoman's character growth comes screeching to a halt in order to privilege her attraction to him. Mulvey suggests these narratives typically lead toward a female character who becomes the male protagonist's "property", as is supported by her willingness to be physically pulled around for answers (Mulvey 64). Her ambivalence to his aggressive behavior moves a step beyond tolerance as she pulls him in for a kiss despite fresh grief over the woman she once called "baby". In this moment, he has won her affection based on an assertive, aggressive physicality that is deeply rooted in the patriarchal.

Catwoman's obedient answers and move to kiss Batman may read as patronizing moments of characterization fraught with the misogynistic implications of a male gaze, but a deeper reading uncovers a hidden layer of queer complexity. She only moves to kiss him after a moment of vulnerability from Batman where he apologizes for speaking out of turn about Annika. He watches her silently as she divulges her traumas to him, engaging in another literal male gaze that is not domineering nor patronizing. Much like the kiss, she is the one to initiate a romantic touch to his cheek, echoing back to the touches she shared with Annika during their final interaction. Her eagerness to move on from her deceased lover may play into the stereotyping of bisexual women as hypersexual, but such a reading eliminates the possibility of a polyamorous interpretation. What persists in this moment is the lack of domineering male presence and the deconstruction of patriarchal male sexuality.

Catwoman's kiss silences his concerns about her seeking revenge for Annika as a reversal of the aggressive behavior he had previously employed. She returns the masculine gesture of forced physical contact to get her way by forcing their lips together. Batman remains suggestively asexual, making no move to embrace her or deepen the kiss. He stands still, no smile on his face when she finally pulls away. Considering she does win silence from him as a result of her initiated romantic contact, the moment could be considered a reiteration of the same repackaging of sexual objectification she used with the DA at the club. Unlike her interaction with the DA, this kiss happens without the feminizing wig or unwelcome, predatory male gaze. From the moment Batman touches her chin to confirm the alignment of her contact lenses, Catwoman's desire has been clear. Her male attraction may be a mechanism to lessen the blow of her queer attraction for a conservative audience, but that theory is impossible to confirm based on film content alone. What remains clear is Catwoman's use of her body to gain power over men and the sexual ambiguity it casts over her identity. Such ambiguity prevents any one reading from taking priority over another, leaving the matter of labeling as "polyamorous", "bisexual", or otherwise entirely up to the viewer rather than being demanded by the narrative.

Featuring a kiss between a man and a woman with a former queer love interest undermines the mutual exclusivity with which queer identities are often handled. Queer representation is often just that—queer representation. It typically "presumes a mutual

exclusivity” that corners characters into a singular category of identity (Shaw 16). Under these rigid labels, bisexuality is nothing more than a chaser to lessen the blow of queerness on resistant viewers. Though this is always a possibility, it does not negate the need for bisexual representation, nor does it undo the film’s attentiveness to other categories of identity for Catwoman. Her complaints about the “white, privileged assholes” of Gotham involve both identifiers of race and class in her sexual identity. Whether or not she has used her sexual power as a tool over Batman in this moment, she has done so as a woman of color under a representative matrix where white, heterosexual, “middle-class ‘respectable’ sexiness” dominates (Gill 151). Her kiss claims space for intersectional queer identities.

Catwoman’s complexity as a queer figure leaves plenty of room for speculation and opens the floor for a dialogue on how sexual identities should be represented. No one interpretation encompasses the full weight of her representation. Prioritizing an analysis of the patriarchal gaze in *The Batman* reveals a Catwoman whose representation is deeply flawed and centered around heteronormative, mythic norms of value and attractiveness. Expanding this reading to include the presence of a female gaze alongside the absence of rigid labels suggests a Catwoman that is grounded in her portrayal of intersectional identities.

Works Cited

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