

“Using Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze to analyse the representations of women in romantic comedy films over time”

Over many decades there has been an evolution of the representations of young women in romantic films. Many academics have discussed these representations and the impact that they have had upon wider society. Whilst some scholars take the view that gender stereotyping and representations have improved overtime, the dominant feminist reading when analysing the representations of young women in romantic comedies comes from Laura Mulvey’s male gaze theory (1975), which suggests that “to-be-looked-at-ness” is still a current theme in female characters in Hollywood films. To analyse the theory of the male gaze I will be using three romantic film examples, from different decades, to compare and contrast the representations of young women, allowing me to examine the changes and evolution of these representations overtime. The representations of women present in *Pretty in Pink* (1986), *Notting Hill* (1999), and *Sex and the City* (2008) are highly relevant in the feminist media debate, and consequently are important to study in order to challenge the social construction of gender within the movie industry. By drawing upon Mulvey’s scholarship this essay will reflect on gender issues such as sexualisation and lack of diversity, and determine how changing perspectives of wider cultural issues such as race and class has changed the cinematic representation of young women overtime.

Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze was first published in her book *Visual and other Pleasures* in 1975, in a chapter dedicated to representations within narrative cinema. By combining psychoanalysis research with film theory and her own feminist views, Mulvey argued that the film industry creates and targets all films with a male audience in mind. In the chapter titled “Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema” Mulvey describes the problematic representations of women being only subjected to traditional gender roles, or extreme sexualisation for the male viewer’s pleasure. By drawing upon examples of strong male protagonists and passive female characters in Hollywood cinema, Mulvey’s book emphasises that female characters are mere objects of their male counterparts for the gaze of the male audience.

In order to analyse the improvements of, or lack of, representations of young women in romantic comedy films overtime, this essay will focus on three films from different decades: *Pretty in Pink*, *Notting Hill*, and *Sex and the City*. I have chosen to use these films to apply Mulvey's theory as whilst they are all in the romantic comedy genre, they each offer varying representations of gender stereotypes and feminism. Whilst *Pretty in Pink* and *Sex and the City* both have female protagonists, it is arguably *Notting Hill* that represents the most powerful and independent representation of women by inverting the traditional male over female power dynamic. By examining the characters of Andie Walsh, Anna Scott, and Carrie Bradshaw through the lens of the male gaze, this essay will determine how far representations of women in romantic comedies has improved since the 80s, and how relevant Laura Mulvey's, and other scholars, feminist gender theories are to this area of study.

Stereotypes and a lack of diversity has been present in Hollywood since the beginning of the film industry, and romantic comedy films are amongst the worst genres for negative or oppressive female representation. Ferris and Young (2008) argue that romantic comedies are a powerful genre for the female audience as it brings them pleasure. However, when using the male gaze theory to analyse such films, it is evident that there are several common themes that run throughout this genre that suggests pleasure is targeted primarily at male viewers, and the male characters seeking pleasure from their female counterpart. Using Mulvey's theory it is understood that women are objects of this gaze, and that gender objectivity is a common representation present throughout romantic comedies. In the abstract of Scharaga's (2017) research, a framework for all romantic comedy narratives is suggested as "boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl again" which highlights the male orientated perspective surrounding romance and successful relationships, as well as the lack of diversity in structuralism and representations. Another frequent representation of young women in romantic comedies is the need to be looked after by the man, very evident in *Sex and the City*, again alluding to the power dynamics at play. This is an interesting factor when analysing *Notting Hill* as it is one of the only romantic comedies where the female character holds most of the relationship power. However, using the male gaze theory it becomes clear that despite this, the male protagonist portrayed by Hugh Grant is pursuing the female lead

for nothing other than her looks and fame. The fact that the men are often older than the women also emphasises how the age disparity present in romantic comedies would be most appealing to a male audience, hence the production creating the film through the lens of the male gaze.

A contentious point of debate amongst scholars is whether representations of young women in romantic comedy films has improved and evolved alongside societies changing views overtime. Romantic comedies almost always portray women actively seeking love and validation from a man, and this explains the popularity of such films in the 1980s. *Pretty in Pink* is an interesting film to analyse as it was unconventional for the genre at the time to have a female protagonist not be represented as a sexual or relying on relationships for happiness. However, the male gaze is still very evident as the character of Andie Walsh is dumped for not being feminine enough. This objectification of men only wanting women for sexual pleasure directly correlates to Mulvey's research and this behaviour can be seen reflected in the male audience. The 80s and 90s pushed the boundaries in terms of more diverse representations of women in romantic comedies and many argue that the film *Thelma and Louise* could have been a turning point, being a female dominated film for a female audience whilst breaking traditional gender boundaries. However, "a quarter century after *Thelma & Louise*, women and girls continue to be side-lined in most media" (Davis, 2017) highlighting that positive representation of women in cinema hasn't progressed as much as it could have overtime. When comparing *Pretty in Pink* to *Sex and the City* it is obvious that whilst there is less overt sexualisation, it is still a problem almost 25 years on. Whilst Carrie Bradshaw has a successful career and is a strong independent woman, she is still represented to have a "singular obsession with men" (Wignall, 2008). These representations of basing a women's happiness off of men does not challenge any gender power structures that scholars like Mulvey have fought for and proves that romantic comedies still heavily rely on body image and sex to sell films to an audience viewing through the male gaze.

Analysing representations of women is a very broad spectrum which is why many scholars have narrowed this down to look at different demographics of women, and other factors that work against women's representations. Factors such as class and race often influence the representations as Mulvey argues that men have specific desires and fantasies about different types of women. Bell hooks (1992) expanded Mulvey's arguments and said that female viewers, especially black females, 'look at films with an oppositional gaze'. This implies that while the representations in the industry are not changing, female audiences are starting to oppose and challenge the gender and racial stereotypes, roles and sexualisation on screen. This can also be applied to issues of class which are evident in the film *Pretty in Pink*, when the female protagonist is portrayed as an outcast and unattractive to men due to her poor, working class background, highlighting the materialistic tendencies of the male gaze.

There is also much controversy when debating if society creates these negative representations in films, or if these representations of women influence society. In most western societies there has been much improvement in the last decade over gender equality issues such as banning gender stereotypical adverts in the UK and 2019 recording a record number of female leads in romantic comedy films than any other year on record. However, it is clear that this feminist cultural step forward has not been mirrored entirely into the film industry and has not changed the way society views female characters. For example, *Sex and the City* can be assumed to be a post-feminist film that represents societies need for strong, independent women on screen. However, despite this female centred film for a female audience, there are still aspects of the male gaze that cannot be detached from it. The male counterpart of Carrie Bradshaw, Mr. Big, is a prime example of the male gaze in action amongst male viewers. Mulvey argues that as well as men deriving sexual pleasure from women on screen, there is also a narcissistic element whereby men derive pleasure from the male characters that remind them of themselves. Mr. Big has all the characteristics of an ego-centred, stereotypical alpha male who has very little respect for women, and this aspect of the gaze can often be reciprocated into real life society where women are seen as lesser than citizens. The representations of women present in romantic comedies reflects the needs of an audience who are so comfortable with seeing men in

positions of power in films. Mulvey states that "woman as representation signifies castration" and this symbolic metaphor highlights that the film industry benefits from lack of female representation, as the male intended audience prefer a power imbalance. This implies that, from an industry business point of view, we may never get equal gender representation in romantic comedies.

Representations of women in romantic comedies remains stereotypical and structured in narrative to please male characters, male directors, and male audiences. Young women are often portrayed as weak and in need of a male companion to find happiness, opposing feminist ideologies. Sexualisation and a lack of diversity of women on screen has continued to be a selling point for the film industry and Laura Mulvey emphasises this need for men to find pleasure in romantic comedies for them to be deemed successful. However, this is an extremely broad and diverse category to analyse, and it would be impossible to make a complete judgement about representations of women in romantic comedies using the work of just one academic scholar. Therefore, it is imperative that future research is carried out within this subject area comparing how other feminist gender studies would analyse such films, and whether such conclusions would be made for other film genres. In particular, I would like to research the difference in representations of men and women in romance films compared to the funnier and often more stereotypical genre of romantic comedies. This would allow film producers and consumers alike the ability to acknowledge that the male gaze is present throughout the whole industry, even in films that are targeted and made for women, and hopefully this would incite a fight for a more gender equal film industry. The representations of women in romantic comedies have changed overtime but most will argue that they have not progressed enough. The improvements made towards female representation in romantic comedies can be put down to the growth in digital spaces that have incited feminist public debate, and the rise in gender equality campaigns for women in the media industry. However, whilst male consumers still have the ability to "watch in an active controlling sense, an objectified other" (Mulvey, 1975) there is still going to be issues of sexualisation, objectification, and a lack of female diversity on screen, despite that fact that this is less overt now than in the 1980s. Seeing how these representations have changed in the last few decades alone poses the question: how might these depictions

change again in the future? Ultimately, a significant change towards gender equality in representations of women in romantic comedies is needed, and whilst we are slowly seeing an increase in women playing traditionally male roles, it is not enough yet. Mulvey's theory continues to be the most accurate portrayal of the oppression in representation of women in romantic comedies, and equality will not be achieved until the film industry and viewers stop watching films through the lens of the male gaze.

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