



# **MALE GAZE IN FILM**

The difference between the male gaze in male and female directed movies

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## Introduction

Women historically have had more subdued roles in film than their opposing male colleagues. This portrayal of women is mostly seen in them being sexual in their roles, but this is not the only part of it. Mulvey (1975), who coined the term male gaze, states in her essay that women are more than just objectified in films. The reason for their on screen presence is often reduced to mere visual pleasure for the audience or even for the opposing male character. The agency that male characters have is lost on most female characters in film. Not only are they objectified, their decisions seem to be made for them. Since identification with characters is one of the goals of film makers, the female audience seems to be left out. They have the opportunity to either identify with the male protagonist, or with the female characters who lacks agency and are generally dependent on the men around them. This presence of the male gaze, which has been dominant since the beginning of cinema, is shaping how women are viewed in movies. This view has real-world implications, it bleeds through to everyday life as women start self-objectifying which has detrimental effects on their mental health (Calogero, 2004, p. 19).

The male gaze has an undisputed presence in film, in this thesis the question will be answered if this presence is linked to the gender of the director. To do this, I have analyzed four films directed by men and four films directed by women. Here I focused on the presence of the male gaze and combined my findings with critical theory to answer the research question:

- *How does the male gaze differ in movies directed by male directors or female directors?*

The focus on the differentiation here lies in if the male gaze occurs, and in which way it manifests itself in the films. The way in which the male gaze manifests itself will be analyzed through a definition that was derived from literature surrounding the male gaze. This definition has predominantly been subtracted from Laura Mulvey's (1975) essential essay: "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema". To give a short summary of this definition, there are five key factors which determine whether the male gaze is present:

- *Camera work:* Close-ups of women's bodies, shots from a low perspective, framing of the female character in the shot as an innuendo or lingering, sometimes slow-motion, shots of the female character with a sexualizing nature.

- *Costumes*: The clothing that the female characters wear or, more importantly, the lack thereof. Do the female characters only wear revealing outfits?
- *Agency*: Do the female characters have an impact on the story or are they passive or subordinate?
- *Perspective*: Is the movie written from a male or female perspective?
- *Appearance*: Is the woman that is portrayed young? Does she have unwrinkled skin? Does she have fine facial features? Is she well-toned or slim?

While directors do not explicitly ‘use’ the male gaze in their films, the decision on how the female characters are portrayed is ultimately the responsibility of the director. In this thesis I focused on analyzing what the differences are between female and male directors. These differences are laid out in this thesis through a thematic analysis. Five of these themes were derived from literature, these are the same concepts as the five factors of the definition of the male gaze. Two additional themes were found during the thematic analysis that were supplementary to this definition. These themes did not inherently indicate that the male gaze is present in the film but amplified how the male gaze emerges.

The differences in how male and female directors direct their films and how this realizes itself in the movies has not been researched so far. Most studies have focused on what the male gaze is, the different aspects of it, and its real-world implications, this is fundamental to our cultural and societal understanding of film but there is room to go further. Even though my research is limited in its scope, I will try to add to the existing research by researching the differences the gender of the director makes. The importance of this research lies in the question if female directors diverge from traditional filmmaking, enabling a creative space where woman are subjects instead of objects. Via this route I tried to research in which way representation of women in films currently exists, highlighting the importance of diverse authorship. There is a further gap in research as to how the male gaze influences how men see themselves and if they change their behavior based on the films they watched. Therefore, further research on the male gaze must be done.

## Literature Review

The male gaze was first used as a term by Laura Mulvey (1975) in her essay “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema”. In her essay Mulvey builds on commentary by Berger (1972), mainly his ideas on how looking at individuals is shaped by gendered power dynamics. His assertion on how men act and women appear is the basis on which Mulvey built her own theory. To understand how I used this term in my research, a summarization of Mulvey’s essay is needed. This will further be expanded upon by comparing it to newer literature and see if the definition holds up, is augmented or revised.

Mulvey (1975) is a film theorist who started discourse on women’s position in film with her groundbreaking essay. Her idea of the male gaze starts off by explaining how women in our phallogocentric society are the bearer of meaning and do not have the ability to make meaning (Mulvey, 1975, p. 7). This is one of the first important concepts, in a male dominated world, women lack agency to write their own stories, which reverberates to film. Male characters are the main characters of most movies and decide how the story progresses, their female coworkers lack the ability to change this. The objectification is not just a way to force women to merely be a pretty object (which is also important and will be built upon later), but are also made to be incapable of changing the direction a movie is going. This lack of agency is one of the factors I used in my research while analyzing films. One of the important deciding factors was if the film was written from a male or female perspective. The second point that was important was the agency the female characters had or lacked. If the movie was written from a male perspective, did the female characters portray at least a partial role as a subject, or were they mere props for the male character to use?

Mulvey (1975, p. 7) notes that to change the patriarchal society, it is important to use psychoanalysis to produce a clearer image of the current state of affairs. This slight obsession with psychoanalysis leads her to include a term coined by Freud, scopophilia (Mulvey, 1975, p. 8). This term not only deals with the pleasure of looking, but goes further than that. Views have the ability to be objectifying and controlling, and this is precisely how the male gaze controls women. Even though it seems like scopophilia only sees to non-consensual objectifying looks, it applies to cinema as well. First of all, the director decides how the women are shown on screen and how the male characters look at the female characters. Secondly, the audience in the cinema sits in a darkened room and has the ability to anonymously look at the characters on the screen. Since directors are also making sure that the female characters look ‘pleasurable’ for a male audience, this heightens the presence of scopophilia. In our modern streaming era, it is even easier for the audience to look at the

women on screen in an objectifying pleasurable way. This is where another important factor is deducted from, the camera work. To make the female characters look pleasurable for the audience, different camera techniques are used. These usually involve slow motion shots, close-ups of not just their faces, but also other body parts, shots from a low perspective or other sexualizing ways the directors portrays the female characters.

The next point Mulvey (1975, p. 11) makes is that men and women look differently, men look actively while women are forced to look passively. This passiveness of women forces them to exhibit themselves in film. Costume design that heightens the ease and pleasure of looking at female characters is one way directors do this. This is another factor I have taken into account when analyzing film. Is there a mismatch between the clothing which the male and female characters wear? Are the women always wearing revealing clothing while the men are fully clothed? Mulvey (1975, p. 12) continues on about how women have two functions in film. The first is to be appealing to the male characters in the film, the second function is to be pleasurable to look at for the audience. In film this usually happens simultaneously through camera work that shows men staring at the female characters.

The male gaze that Mulvey (1975, p. 13) describes is based on heterosexual films. In a heterosexual setting, according to her, the man cannot be objectified and sexualized in the same way that women can. Currently, there are exceptions to this. The movie *Magic Mike* (2012) shows muscular men dancing shirtless, and is aimed at a female audience. However this does not fall under the scope the female gaze, as the female gaze is not the direct opposite of the male gaze. The female gaze, according to Dirse (2013, p. 15,19), is different from the male gaze in how women are portrayed when there is a female cinematographer or director involved. Female directors and cinematographers portray women in a more meaningful way. They are the subject of that moment and not, as in movies where the male gaze is present, just an object. Essentially, the female gaze sees to how women see other women. The key distinction here is between how men see women and how women see other women. Women do not objectify other women, nor do they sexualize them. The reason can be traced from theory by Doane (1982), where Doane builds on Mulvey's (1975) definition of the male gaze and her afterthoughts (1981). Doane adds the problem of identification that the female audience has when looking at male protagonists. If a woman were to look at a movie where the male gaze is present, she is asked to identify with the male character that has agency (Doane, 1982, p. 80). This creates an inner conflict where the woman is wedged between a masculine and female position. The other option the female audience has, is to identify with the female characters. This is also problematic, since the female characters lack agency and

are sexualized and objectified, the female audience will defy their influence on their own life. Doane's (1982, p. 82) idea on how women deal with this problem is defined by masking. Women put on a masquerade which allows them to identify with the male characters while still flaunting their femininity. The problem here lies in the midway point where they exist, their flaunting femininity is a farce, or a role they play, and their masculine sides are hidden since it is 'not done' to be seen in this way. This matches the additions Mulvey makes in her essay "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun*" (1981, p. 13). In this essay Mulvey (1981, p. 14) accentuates that the binary she mentioned in her earlier work might not be as rigid at all times. Women's roles in movies can be more gender ambivalent, especially movies where they balance between playing the 'lady' and needing a tomboy approach when the situation arises.

Kaplan's *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (1983) provides a critical expansion of the male gaze theory by putting it within a broader structure of filmmaking, spectatorship. Building on Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze, Kaplan (1983, pp. 23–25) examines how mainstream cinema is structured around patriarchal ideologies that position women as passive objects of visual pleasure and men as active subjects. However, Kaplan goes further by interrogating not only how women are portrayed but also how female spectatorship is shaped by these cinematic norms, similar to Doane (1982). She explores the psychological impact on women viewers who are compelled to identify with male protagonists, yet also recognize their own objectification on screen (Kaplan, 1983, p. 30–34). This position creates tension and alienation for female spectators.

Crucially, Kaplan addresses the role of female authorship in potentially challenging the dominant male gaze. She argues that simply placing women behind the camera does not automatically erase patriarchal cinematic ways of filming, as female directors often work within the constraints of male-dominated narrative and visual conventions (Kaplan, 1983, p. 125–127). Nevertheless, she hypothesizes how women filmmakers might show female subjectivity and experiences through alternative modes of storytelling and visual language, similar to the female gaze.

Building upon Mulvey's revised framework, contemporary scholars have explored the male gaze's presence in modern cinema. Gill (2007) discusses the concept of postfeminist media culture, where the representation of women often appears to be empowered but still conforms to patriarchal standards. Gill argues that such portrayals show the male gaze under the disguise of female agency, highlighting the need to critically engage with media that claims to be progressive (Gill, 2007, p. 149).

Contemporary cinema has also begun to challenge the dominance of the male gaze. Films directed by women or films that try to stay away from traditional narratives offer alternative perspectives. For example, Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) shows a vision that emphasizes mutual recognition and emotional depth over objectification, illustrating the potential for the female gaze to redefine contemporary storytelling.

For my research, I do not focus on the difference between the male and female gaze. Dirse's (2013) ideas on how women see women does however match my research. In analyzing the difference in how male and female directors 'use' the male gaze, I will also partially determine if women are portrayed differently by female directors.

hooks (1992) added to Mulvey's (1975) definition of the male gaze by adding a key component that was missing in Mulvey's original text. hooks' (1992, p. 115) idea on the male gaze criticized earlier works by highlighting how black women have been underrepresented in the discourse. For black women, the act of looking itself historically carried dangers, as enslaved and oppressed people were often punished for direct, assertive gazes (hooks, 1992, p. 116). Thus, developing a gaze was not merely about resisting sexual objectification but about reclaiming agency in a system that sought to deny their subjectivity altogether. hooks (1992, p. 117) further critiques the limited and stereotypical representations of black women in popular media, emphasizing that resistance involves not only critiquing what is seen but how one chooses to look. The oppositional gaze becomes an act of political rebellion, allowing black female spectators to interrogate, refuse, and reinterpret dominant cinematic narratives (hooks, 1992, p. 128).

The concept of the male gaze extends beyond cinematic theory, its ramifications are felt in gender differences in everyday life. Snow (1989) adds to, and criticizes, Mulvey's (1975) essay by complicating the simplicity of the male gaze. Snow argues that the gaze is not just an act of male dominance but a cultural and psychological happening in which identification, desire, and power come together (Snow, 1989, p. 30). This complexity, according to Snow, makes the male gaze particularly dangerous and powerful, it is not only what men do but also how both men and women are conditioned to see and be seen. This has consequences, the male gaze becomes internalized in ways that influence self-perception and public behavior for both men and women.

This internalization of the male gaze has real-world psychological consequences, particularly for women. Calogero (2004) provides empirical evidence supporting objectification theory, which asserts that the male gaze contributes to women's heightened body surveillance and appearance anxiety. In her study, women who were exposed to a male

gaze conditions (being looked at by a man) reported significantly greater concerns about their physical appearance than those in a control group (Calogero, 2004, p. 18). These findings demonstrate how even seemingly innocent or everyday instances of the male gaze, such as being looked at, can have negative effects on women's mental health and self-esteem.

Calogero's study illuminates how the male gaze functions as a correctional force in public spaces. Women adjust their behavior, the way they dress, and their appearance in anticipation of being looked at, which intensifies the power dynamics in a patriarchal culture (Calogero, 2004, p. 19). This links directly back to Snow's argument that the gaze is not just a visual mechanism but is embedded in the culture and normalizes gendered hierarchies in it (Snow, 1989, p. 33).

While Mulvey's (1975) foundational framework effectively outlines how cinema defines women as passive visual objects, it has also been criticized for being one sided and paying insufficient attention to the depth of intersectionality and agency. Contemporary feminist scholars increasingly challenge the presumed passivity of the female spectator and the unidirectional nature of visual power. For instance, post-Mulvey theorists like Stacy (1987, p. 49) complicate Mulvey's framework by adding that female spectatorship can be both complicit in and resistant to the male gaze. Women viewers are not only subjected to objectification but also capable of negotiating identification in different ways. This ambivalence supports Doane's (1982) theorization of masquerade and identification, yet it also opens up the question whether female agency is always blocked off by a patriarchal system, or if resistance can emerge even within those frameworks.

In postfeminist visual culture the appearance of agency can itself be deceptive. Gill (2007) critiques the focus on women's bodies in postfeminist culture. Female characters are seemingly empowered but are actually self-sexualizing women who reproduce patriarchal norms under the guise of autonomy. This version of feminist aesthetics creates marketable images that seem to challenge the notion of agency through the visibility of women's bodies but in this context, agency becomes performative. Women's bodies are used as the source of their agency but only when matching to patriarchal standards (Gill, 2007, p. 149).

In a modern society, intersectionality plays a role. Coined by Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality refers to the ways in which systems of oppression, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, interact to produce unique forms of discrimination. Nash (2008) emphasizes that intersectionality should not merely be used descriptively to list identities but must be understood as a critical methodology that challenges simplistic models of identity. She critiques the way intersectionality has been absorbed into feminist discourse without fully

addressing its implications. Instead, Nash (2008, p. 3–5) urges scholars to see race, gender, and sexuality as connected and to reflect on how power is constructed through their entanglement. This approach deepens our understanding of how women experience gaze and agency differently depending on their position in society, something that has been slightly overlooked in traditional feminist male gaze theory.

## **Methodology**

### *I. Definition of Male Gaze*

To research if there is a difference between the male gaze as seen in movies directed by either men or women, some preliminaries needed to be set. First of all, a definition is needed that can be used to ascertain that the film has the male gaze in it. Since the male gaze is quite versatile in its application, it is important to have a base definition to underscore this research. This does not imply that the male gaze is black and white, there could be ambivalences in the films that were analyzed. In the results and discussion section these uncertainties are addressed further, and it is explained how they tell their own story about how the film engages with the male gaze.

The definition of the male gaze will be deducted from the literature previously mentioned. The first important factor is the camera work in the movie. As Mulvey (1975) mentions in her first essay on the male gaze, the camera can be used to portray the lack of agency female characters possess. Using shots from a low angle to accentuate the bodily forms of women is one way directors sexualize and objectify their female characters while remaining relatively inconspicuous in their goal. Another way directors show women as a pleasurable object whose function is to be seen, is through close-up shots. These shots are usually of their chest or behind, but can also be a close-up of a face or legs. Sometimes these shots are combined with an innuendo. During action scenes, or sometimes even where the female character merely walks by, slow-motion shots are used to highlight the feeling men have when gazing at women. This gives the audience the time to look at the female character and get pleasure from seeing her, scopophilia. Slow-motion is also used when women are seen running, working out or practicing sports in other ways. This way the director accentuates the movement of their bodies, another big part of making sure the female characters are pleasurable to look at. Any other shot that has a sexualizing nature can also qualify as highlighting the male gaze.

The second criteria derived from the literature is the costume design. Since the female characters are meant to derive pleasure from the audience through their appearance, one of the ways this is conveyed is through their outfits. If the female characters wear revealing clothing, this could be for the benefit of scopophilia, giving the audience members further tools for their enjoyment. It could however be negated if both the male and female characters wear clothing that is similar in how revealing it is. Scenes where the female character is nude but the male character is fully clothed also give an indication that this is an instance of the male

gaze. This is a decision purely based on taking away agency from the woman and making her an object that is pleasurable to look at. Since fashion outside of film is also shaped by the male gaze, this criteria can easily be met. For this factor to make a difference I focused on where the costume design was inherently aimed at scopophilia and not just portraying the fashion trends of its time. Make-up is also a part of the male gaze. To meet the standards women have to hold themselves to in order to be attractive, they are required to wear make-up at all times on screen. This is part of the reason why when women wake up in movies, their hair is done and they have a full face of make-up.

The third criteria which defines the male gaze is the agency the female characters possess. This is not a simple criteria. The difference in agency of characters can have quite subtle indications. Mulvey (1975, p. 12) focuses in her essay on how male characters cannot be sexualized and therefore benefit from shaping the narrative structure of films. Women, on the other hand, are easily stuck in their roles as sexualized objects, which negates their ability to shape how the film progresses. Since the characters are written by the director or screenwriter, their agency is evidently dependent on these writers. The difference that this criteria is aiming at, is if the story progresses around the choices of the male characters or if the female characters truly shape the film with their actions and not just their presence. In movies where the male gaze is present, women are created to be used by the male characters to help them progress the story. This is not the same as agency, it would be better compared to female characters being a plot device, thus substantiating their status as an object opposed to them being a subject. This passivity of female characters is, as previously mentioned, not an obvious factor in films. The sexualization of women's bodies in movies can even coincide with female characters that possess agency. This complexity in determination of agency in film makes this a hard factor to analyze in films.

The fourth factor that defines the presence of the male gaze in film is the perspective. This criteria is purely the difference of films being written from a female or a male perspective. While this is a factor that is easily determined, the current film industry is being dominated by movies written from male perspectives. If a film is written from a female perspective, the film could potentially still contain the male gaze. This criteria should be combined with other factors to determine if the male gaze is present in the film and to which extent.

The last criteria deducted from the theory on the male gaze is the appearance of women in film. Movies where the male gaze is present are commonly aimed at a male audience that enjoys gazing at women. To heighten the pleasure that the audience perceives,

women are cast that fit into the beauty standards of our society. Most women in films are of a young age, slender and have Eurocentric features. These beauty standards can be seen as a rulebook. If a woman does not meet these standards, she is usually either a mother or a funny character that is there for comedic relief to give her character purpose. If a movie contains the male gaze, it is rare for a woman to have agency while not meeting these beauty standards.

## II. *Selection of Films*

To analyze films, a small selection of them was made. For my research, the focus was on the difference of the presence of the male gaze in movies directed by female or male directors. Since different genres have different occurrences of the male gaze, I decided to determine which genre would best fit my research. I found the relevance of the real-world implications of the male gaze in film to have a significant meaning. Since drama films usually try to portray the world in a less filtered way than other genres, I decided to focus on the drama genre. Not only are drama movies closer to real life because of their realistic setting, they are also character driven and explore the relationships of these characters to their environment. Comparing this to other genres, such as science fiction, action or romance, the realism drama films tend to prioritize is absent in these other genres. Romance or comedy movies can often be exaggerated in their themes in order to be entertaining. Action, horror and science fiction movies often prioritize entertainment completely in disregard of any realistic interactions between the characters. To assure that the male gaze is occurring in a film, the drama genre offers the best place to analyze if and how it the male gaze appears This is also aided by the slower pace drama movies seem to have.

To make sure that the movies were reflections of our current society, I decided to use movies that came out after 2010. This way I could ascertain that the analysis of these movies adds to the contemporary debate. Films from before 2010 differ culturally from more modern films. This would mean that my findings could be compromised by the suggestion that society has developed further away from misogyny, which is linked to the male gaze. Modern films should reflect current culture, thus making my findings actual.

For my research, I decided to analyze eight films. This amount of films should be enough to assure the validity of my findings. Even though eight films should be enough, this is still a small amount of films to research something as complex as the male gaze. This is why further research on the male gaze in modern films should be done, with added attention to the difference in the gender of the directors. The reason that only eight films were analyzed were because of time restrictions. If the opportunity had been present, a bigger

sample size would have been chosen. Four of the films I analyzed were directed by women, the other four were directed by men. As previously mentioned, the films were drama films released after 2010. The films were also mainstream, meaning that they were from big studios and were popular. Because these films were popular, they either were derived from or added to popular culture, adding to the validity of the findings. Niche movies by smaller studios are more likely to have cultural ideas that do not match the current social climate. This would mean that in the findings it would be difficult to define the male gaze in context of the entirety of film. The eight films I chose still will not define *all* of film, but this way I can ensure it is more within reach of this goal. For example, one movie is European and all other seven are from Hollywood. This means that all films are western and thus will only be applicable to the western film scene. I made this decision to narrow down my research, otherwise the difference between cinema from different regions would dilute my findings. Further research on the male gaze in Asian, African, Latin American and Middle Eastern cinema should be done.

The first film I chose is *Babygirl* (2024) directed by Halina Reijn. Halina Reijn is a Dutch actor who started directing films in 2020. Her movie *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (2022) was extremely successful under Gen Z audiences. For *Babygirl*, Halina Reijn decided to explore feminism on the work floor. The main character Romy is the CEO of a robotic automation company. When a new batch of interns comes to the firm, one man called Samuel stands out to her in particular. Even though Romy is married, they initiate an affair which examines how much agency Romy can have in their relationship when Samuel is the dominant force between them. This film is, as all other movies, a drama. Being directed by a woman and having a female perspective could mean that there are no occurrences of the male gaze.

The second film I analyzed is *Past Lives* (2023) directed by Celine Song. Another movie that is from the 2020s, adding to the image of modern society. Celine Song is a director who's directional debut and only film since then is *Past Lives*. Celine Song was born in Korea but moved to Canada when she was 12. This is mirrored in *Past Lives* where the main character also moves to North America from Korea when she is still young of age. The movie is written from a female perspective, the main character Nora follows the windings of life Celine Song has followed herself. While being semi-autobiographical, the film is fiction and Nora is her own character, not just a version of Celine Song. The most important theme of the movie is eternal, or true, love, this is explored through the differences between a boyfriend Nora had in Korea whom she has never forgotten and her husband she has in New York. The way she meets her husband also mirrors Celine Song's life. This is another movie directed by

a woman with a female perspective. Its introspective nature about the meaning of connection and love could establish circumstances where the male gaze remains absent.

The third movie is a bit different than all other films, *Booksmart* (2019) directed by Olivia Wilde is a coming of age film that can also be seen as a comedy. Since comedies were a genre that I tried to exclude, this movie is a bit different. *Booksmart* has serious themes that mostly deal with the coming of age of women in contemporary society. This is, however, paired with comedic relief. To make sure that this movie was analyzed similarly to the other seven, the comedic scenes that were slightly exaggerated are analyzed as less serious unless they were too obscene. Olivia Wilde is an actress, activist and director. Her directional debut *Booksmart* was extremely successful under Gen Z audiences. *Booksmart* is about two friends, Amy and Molly, who have prioritized their high school grades over their social lives. When graduation is near they learn that people who did not take grades as serious as them have also gotten into Ivy League schools. This breaks their world view, they try to make up for the time they lost being kids by going out looking for what the other popular kids are doing. Since the movie deals with parties hosted by high school seniors, this seems like the situation where the male gaze would occur, while still being directed by a woman and written from a female perspective.

The fourth film I analyzed is *Lady Bird* (2017) directed by Greta Gerwig. Greta Gerwig is an actress, playwright, screenwriter and director who is currently most known for the movie *Barbie* (2023). *Lady Bird* is a coming of age film, similar to *Booksmart*. However, the focus of *Lady Bird* is the relationship of the main character Christine and her mother. This film also incorporates comedy elements, although these are scarce and mostly used to give the heavy subject matter a slightly more lighthearted appearance. The center of the film is Christine and her growth from being a girl in high school to an adult that attends university. Despite the presence of Christine's dating life, the focus of the movie is on how Christine interacts with her mother. Their strained relationship is explored during hardships and the movie tries to determine when a mother daughter relationship crosses the border into toxicity. Since the film shows a high school girl dating, it is likely for the male gaze to occur. The intrigue of this film is to see if a movie about high school girls, written from a female perspective, and directed by a woman still has the male gaze present to satisfy the audience.

*About Time* (2013) directed by Richard Curtis is the fifth film I watched. Richard Curtis is predominantly a screenwriter and has only directed three movies in his career. One of these films, *Love Actually* (2003) is one of the most well-known Christmas movies ever made. *About Time* is a drama film with romance and comedy elements. The movie revolves

around Tim and his life from the age of 18 years old onwards. When Tim turns 18, his dad explains to him how the male side of his family has always had the ability to time travel. This is, however, limited to moments they already experienced themselves. The film follows Tim growing up, trying to lead a regular life while being able to travel back in time to fix any mistake he may have made. This opens up how Tim can influence the ones around him, ensuring the consequences of his actions go unpunished, which has the chance to develop into manipulation. Since this is the first film written from a male perspective and directed by a man, it is intriguing to analyze how it differs from the movies that were directed by women. The fact that Tim has manipulative time travel powers also opens the door for occurrences of the male gaze.

The sixth film I analyzed is *Marriage Story* (2019) directed by Noah Baumbach. Noah Baumbach is a director who collaborated with Greta Gerwig multiple times in the past, they co-wrote *Frances Ha* (2012) together which also stars Greta Gerwig as the main character. *Marriage Story* deals with the divorce of the two main characters Charlie and Nicole. Since this film deals with two main characters it is written from both a female and a male perspective. This is the only film on the list of films I have analyzed that deals with a split perspective. The movie deals with the divorce in a serious manner, the son of Nicole and Charlie is the most important factor in their life but also leads to heated discussions. The divorce starts in a relaxed and amiable manner. However, once the divorce lawyers come in the meetings become more hostile. This movie gives the perfect palate to analyze how male directors deal with both a male and female perspective, despite one director's way of dealing with female perspective not automatically being applicable to all other directors. The way the main characters deal with one another also gives room to analyze if the male gaze occurs, or if compassion is the overarching theme contrasting the lust usually seen in movies where the male gaze is present.

*Silver Linings Playbook* (2012) directed by David O. Russell is the seventh film I analyzed to determine the difference in male and female directors concerning the male gaze. David O. Russell is a director who is most known for *Silver Linings Playbook* and *American Hustle* (2013). His movies mostly deal with hardships either in or outside family situations. *Silver Linings Playbook* is no exception, the movie follows Pat who is just released from a mental hospital. He rejoins society by moving in with his parents, trying to get his job back. But mostly, all he tries to do is get back with his ex-wife. Pat has bipolar disorder which the movie seems to portray as an inability to lie or keep silent. Pat spills his unfiltered thoughts on everything that happens in the film. To get his ex-wife to like him again he teams up with

Tiffany, who also has bipolar disorder. The interactions between Pat and Tiffany can get extremely vulgar without the director trying for it to be comedic. This gives way for the male gaze to occur when Pat speaks his thoughts. Furthermore another film written from a male perspective and directed by a man opens the door to analyze if the male gaze occurrences in this film differ from the ones that were directed by a woman and written from a female perspective.

The last film I analyzed is *The Worst Person In The World* (2021) directed by Joachim Trier. Joachim Trier is a director best known this same movie. The movie is Norwegian, which means all dialogue is Norwegian as well. Since all other films I analyzed are Hollywood films, there is a chance that a difference exists between European and American cinema concerning the male gaze, this will however not be analyzed in my thesis. The movie follows Julie as she navigates her life through different studies at university. This means that this is the only film on the list that is written from a female perspective which is directed by a man. The film has multiple major themes, family, love and relationships, life and death and a lack of a wish for children. The film seems to focus on all things that a person can struggle with in their 20s and 30s. Since this also involves relationships, the male gaze is likely to be present. Because it is written from a female perspective and directed by a man, the question arises if the male gaze will be present by objectifying the main character or if this is a thing that only happens to side characters.

### *III. Analysis*

For my thesis, thematic analysis was employed to examine the presence and function of the male gaze in the aforementioned eight drama films. A thematic analysis allows the identification of how small decisions, such as camera work and costume design, add to the overarching presence or absence of the male gaze. Using the definition derived from literature, the coding process aimed to be consistent, thus ensuring inter-coder reliability to the furthest extent.

As previously mentioned, the central aim of this study is to explore whether and how the male gaze manifests differently in films directed by men versus those directed by women. Given the interpretive nature of my thesis, focused not on measurable quantities but on the meanings embedded in the film's language, a qualitative method, thematic analysis, was used. Thematic analysis also allows for the comparison of all findings in contrast to singling out a film, making it difficult to analyze it in context of the other films. The themes and codes I found were uncovered through watching the films and taking notes simultaneously, these

notes already contained key words that would be useful for the coding process. In ATLAS.ti, these notes were coded and thematized. The themes I used in my analysis were partially deducted from literature and two additional themes originated during coding. The themes deducted from literature are the same factors I previously mentioned while discussing the definition of the male gaze.

Although the research was conducted by a single coder, steps were taken to improve internal consistency and reduce subjective bias. These included multiple reviews of prior coding, comparison of early and later coding decisions, and the use of a memo containing the definition of the male gaze in ATLAS.ti to reflect on interpretation and maintain conceptual clarity. This self-reflexive process served as an internal check on thematic validity. Using existing themes and analyzing every movie in the same manner also minimizes biases. The prejudice that films directed by men having more occurrences of the male gaze is also nearly negated analyzing movies this way. Using the definition laid out by the literature, the male gaze will be defined enough to assist this negation of biases. All films are analyzed on the same basis, nullifying the gender differences on basis of analysis, assuring the actual differences are as factual as possible.

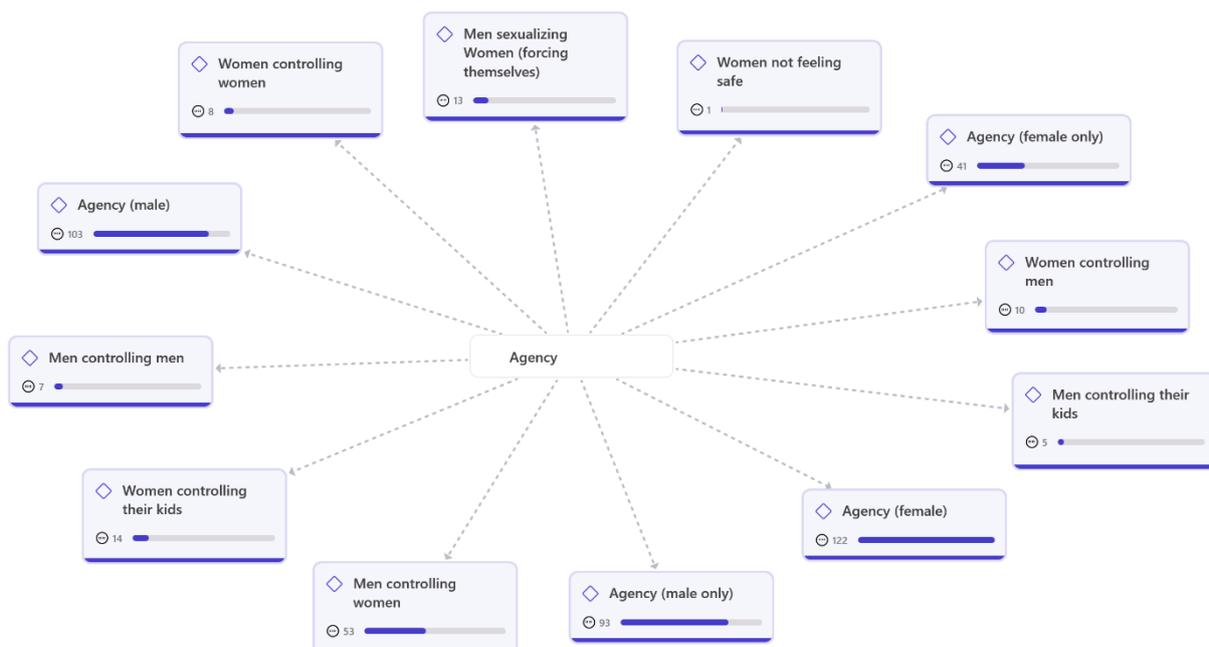
## Results

To analyze if there is a difference between how the male gaze occurs in movies directed by men in comparison to those directed by women, a thematic analysis was done. The seven themes used for the analysis were mostly based on literature and match the definition that was used to characterize the male gaze. These themes were:

- Agency
- Appearance
- Camera Work
- Costume Design
- Gender Norms and Expectations
- Interpersonal Commentary
- Perspective

The themes Interpersonal Commentary and Gender Norms and Expectations were not defined before analyzing the eight films. These themes materialized during the coding process, but are still based on the literature by Mulvey (1975), Snow (1989), Dirse (2013) and Kaplan (1983). In the next section all themes will be discussed individually and worked out with examples from the analyzed films to illustrate the concepts and findings. This way the movies can be compared on a theme by theme basis.

### I. *Agency*



**Figure 1:** Coding Tree of the theme Agency (ATLAS.ti)

For the theme agency, 12 different codes were observed in the eight analyzed films, as seen in figure 1. The most important codes here are simply called Agency. These codes are subdivided into; female, female only, male and male only. This code deals with the concept of agency on screen in a storytelling manner. Per the definition that was earlier defined, agency here sees to characters who have the ability to influence the direction the narrative of the film is taking. This code was split up to increase the readability of the code, when a male character decides the course of action in a particular scene it is not automatically a scene where the male gaze is present. To combat this the agency male characters possess has been split up in; *male* and *male only*. I will go through these codes and give examples when each of these moments presented themselves in the films.

The code Agency (male) is mostly paired with the code Agency (female). This translates on screen to scenes where both the female and male characters have equal amount of say in the narrative.



**Figure 2:** Still from *The Worst Person In The World* (Trier, 2021)

Julie and Eivind are flirting at a party

In the still from *The Worst Person In The World* seen in figure 2 the main character Julie can be seen sitting next to Eivind on a couch at a party. This scene is preceded by a scene where Julie is at a comic book signing party of her then current boyfriend, Aksel. Aksel's comic book is seen as racist and bigoted by most people, so when Julie attends this party she notices the type of people his comics attract. This leads to her decision to leave the signing party early, which is a form of agency she possesses to decide her own story and have control over

her own life. Since *The Worst Person In The World* is directed by a man, this shows, for now, the absence of the male gaze in a male directed movie.

While walking home she stumbles on to a house party and arbitrarily decides to join this party, despite not knowing a single person there. Here she meets Eivind, she immediately tells him she is currently in a relationship to not give him false expectations. Despite this, they start flirting with each other. This is mostly innocent, but the importance of the scene lies in who initiates the flirting, which is both of them. They both decide what they are comfortable with, Eivind does not push Julie into something she is not comfortable with, although he makes the fact that he likes her quite clear. Julie has the agency to decide where this night goes and how close she gets to Eivind. This agency that both the characters have is an example of when the movie shows agency as male and female, and is also why I decided to split this code up into; female, female only, male and male only. As seen in the coding tree, agency male and agency female are quite similar in their frequencies of observation, which shows that they are usually coded together.

Female and male agency occurring simultaneously is observed multiple times in six films. The only films which hardly had these simultaneous occurrences are *Babygirl* (2024) directed by Halina Reijn and *About Time* (2013) directed by Richard Curtis. It is noteworthy to observe that this is one film directed by a woman and one by a man. Thus, for now, disproving the notion that female agency co-occurring with male agency is seen only in films directed by women.

The next important codes are; Agency (male only) and Agency (female only). These codes deal with occurrences where either the male character has full control over the narrative and it is clear that the female character is passive in her being or a situation where these roles are switched. In figure 3 *Lady Bird*, or Christine, can be seen auditioning for a role in the school play. Christine decided from a young age she wanted to be called Lady Bird and not Christine, she held this view all through high school. Her mom never approved of her name change. When Lady Bird auditions for the school play the director asks her what her name is, she replies that she is called Lady Bird. The director does not believe her and asks if that is her given name, she replies that she has given that name to herself, so it is her given name. Even though Lady Bird using her new given name does not have a big impact on the story, she changes it back to Christine once she is in college, it is an important analogy for how Lady Bird wants to have control over her own life. The dominant theme of the movie is motherly control, Lady Bird's mom tries to control her in nearly every way imaginable. The movie debates whether this comes from a place of love or from control, while also

investigating what it does to Lady Bird as a girl becoming a woman. This example shows how total female agency in a scene or film does not have to go hand in hand with the passiveness of male characters.



**Figure 3:** *Still from Lady Bird* (Gerwig, 2017)

Lady Bird (Christine) auditioning for the school play

Six of the eight analyzed films had no more than three scenes where the female character was the only one to possess agency, *Lady Bird* (2017) and *Booksmart* (2019) directed by Olivia Wilde are the only two films that frequent total female agency. Both are directed by women and filmed from a female perspective. It is important to note here that *The Worst Person In The World* (2021) also has complete female agency occurring in the film, but that this is more negative and that this could be intentional. The movie focuses on the life of a woman in her 20s and 30s and tries to show it in a realistic setting. This means that the main character sometimes makes mistakes by using the agency she has. The film tries to convey its message that this does not make someone an inherently bad person. This way of dealing with the opposite of male dominant agency shows nuance, not just in the reversal of gender roles, but also in how women having agency does not equal male dominance.

Total agency of the male characters functions differently than complete female agency. Not only does it occur twice as much in the eight films that were analyzed, but it also has a more manipulative nature.



**Figure 4:** *Still from About Time* (Curtis, 2013)

Tim and Mary lay in bed after their first date

To give an example of dominant male agency in films, *About Time* shows how inconspicuous female character passivity is in film. In *About Time*, Tim has the ability to travel back in time and change his decisions. When he first meets Mary they have an organic interaction, but by traveling back in time he accidentally 'erases' their first encounter. This leads to him searching the whole city to find her again. Eventually he realises she is at a party on a certain day and travels back in time to meet her there. He is not invited to this party nor does he know anyone there. When he finds Mary he tries to impress her by using information he knows about her he learned through their first encounter she does not even remember. Making sure she thinks they like the same things, he manipulates her into going on a date together. At the end of this date Mary invites Tim into her apartment. After they have intercourse for the first time, as seen in figure 4, Tim repeatedly goes back in time to experience the moment again. This emphasises the ability of Tim to decide how and where their relationship is going, demoting Mary to a passive side character. It also demonstrates how male agency is not just about self-determination, but is also dependent on the manipulation of female characters. Compare this to the female agency in *Lady Bird* (2017), and it becomes clear that female agency is actually about self-determination. No male characters have to give up their ability to decide the narrative for female characters to have agency. Another movie where male agency is dominant is in *Babygirl* (2024) directed by Halina Reijn.



**Figure 5:** *Still from Babygirl (Reijn, 2024)*

Romy and Samuel sitting on the bed of a hotel room

In *Babygirl* the main character Romy is the CEO of a robotics company. In the scene depicted in figure 5, the intern of Romy invited her to a second-rate hotel. Even though Samuel, the intern, is lower rated in the hierarchal power structure of the company, he manipulates Romy into meeting him and having an affair with him. The concept of manipulation is not clear cut in the film. One of the reasons for this is that Romy grew up in a cult. This had led her to be very vulnerable to manipulation, which is seen by how easy Samuel forces her into his plans. This is amplified by the fact that Romy as the CEO is not supposed to have much contact with the interns, Samuel gets to know her through 10-minute interviews set up by the company to assist the new workforce. In this small time frame Romy seems to reject Samuel as a person, not wanting him as her intern and not responding to his inappropriate comments. She even nearly fires him for crossing the line because of his direct and confrontational nature. Once he starts forcing her to do things for him she changes the way she feels about him. The forceful manner he commands her with is something that connects with her, probably because of her upbringing where she was continuously manipulated.

The scene in figure 5 is the first time Romy and Samuel meet up outside of work. Romy was attending the opening of a play directed by her husband, she leaves early because of a work emergency. This emergency turns out to be Samuel inviting her to a hotel. Once she

arrives at the hotel, Samuel starts commanding her to do degrading sexual things. One of the first things he says to her is that she is asking to be treated badly because she is wearing sexual clothing. He tells her to get on her knees. Once they get closer to each other Romy tells Samuel that she does not want to hurt him, this shows that Romy feels as if she is in control of their relationship. This raises an important point about the main themes of the film, manipulation and control. Since Romy believes she is in control of their affair, this leads to the question if the affair is consensual or not. The manipulative way Samuel treats her seems unconsensual, but this is never clearly answered in the film. One thing that is clear in the film is the fact that Samuel has full agency over Romy's story, the only choice she makes herself in this film is the one to get together with Samuel. He visits her at her home without asking her while her husband and kids are there. In the hotel room scene, he tells her to be quiet and stand in the corner. Eventually he forces her to lay on the ground while he intimately touches her. After he is finished Romy starts crying, the reason for this is not explained, nor is it important for the story. It seems that giving up control gives Romy a strong emotional reaction which is translated into the intercourse she had with Samuel.

Halina Reijn has had her own views and comments on the question of consent and control. Halina Reijn had an interview with BNNVARA where the interviewer asked her to comment on the criticism the film had received for being anti-feminist (BNNVARA, 2023). These criticisms were aimed at the fact that Romy is a powerful woman who still has a need to be controlled and used, which does not match with the ideals of feminism in the 2020s. Halina Reijn explained how feminism to her is about self determination. This means that Romy should also have the ability to decide that she wants to be dominated, controlled and humiliated. Halina Reijn seems to indicate that Romy's agency exists within her giving up that agency. This creates a duality between dominant male agency and the fact that Romy decided to be dominated. In my analysis, I coded these scenes as dominant male agency for one important reason. Halina Reijn has written Romy has a person who grew up in a cult, this means that being manipulated and lied to is ingrained in her personality. This could lead to traumatic responses that result in behaviour that seems consensual, but is not.

One of the other codes linked to the theme agency is called: "Men controlling women". This is similar to the before mentioned code; agency (male only), but differs in one important way. While agency is the ability to alternate the narrative, which in most cases leads to passivity of the other characters, control is about not just deciding where their own story goes but also controlling other characters' development.



**Figure 6:** *Still from Silver Linings Playbook (Russell, 2012)*

Pat and Tiffany practicing for the dance contest

One example of men controlling women in film are the dance practice scenes from *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012), as seen in figure 6. In this film, the main character Pat is released from a mental institution. While trying to get his life back together, he makes it his mission to get back together with his ex-wife. Once he meets Tiffany, who has borderline personality disorder, they decide to work together to convince Pat's ex-wife that he is a changed man. Tiffany seems to comply to this plan mostly because she secretly has feelings for Pat, while Pat takes complete control of the situation. Before the dance practice scenes, Tiffany explains her wishes to Pat that she wants to participate in a dance contest in their city, Pat immediately turns this down taking away her plans. Only after Pat needs Tiffany to give a letter from him to his ex-wife and Tiffany explains to Pat how participating in a dance contest will convince Pat's ex-wife that he is a different man does he agree to dance with Tiffany. These practice scenes should be moments where Tiffany has the agency and control to teach Pat how to dance. She has been dancing her entire life and it is her wish to participate in the dance contest. This does not discourage Pat to take control of the situation, he questions Tiffany's skills and he insists on doing the dance his way, including adding a song he chose. He also uses his emotions to get Tiffany to agree to his plans, framing the entire dance partnership

through his own emotional agenda. Tiffany, while vocal and confident, is initially positioned more as a therapeutic tool than as an equal partner.

For the theme Agency, the code ‘men controlling women’ occurs five times as much as the code ‘women controlling men’. The difference in the amount of female and male agency codes is not as large. This could be an indication that when female characters have total agency in a scene or part of a film, this does not coincide with them controlling the male characters in these moments. It does indicate the opposite that when male characters possess complete agency in a situation, this often coexists with them excessing control over the female characters. A movie that shows both side of this argument is *Marriage Story* (2019).



**Figure 7:** *Still from Marriage Story* (Baumbach, 2019)

Charlie and Nicole have a conversation after Charlie dropped off Henry

*Marriage Story* (2019) deals with the divorce of Nicole and Charlie, who navigate their situation while ensuring their son Henry does not have to deal with their hardships. This starts out in an awkward fashion where Nicole and Charlie try to go to couple therapy, but they soon realize there is no going back to where they were. Nicole moves back to her mom who lives in Los Angeles while Charlie stays in New York to run the theater company he owns. Nicole used to work with Charlie at this theater company as an actress, but left the company after her and Charlie initiated their divorce.

Their divorce is handled from a distance since they live so far apart, this is added to the fact that Henry wants to stay with Nicole in LA, leading Charlie to feel out of control. Despite having agreed to not hire a divorce lawyer, Charlie receives a call from Nicole's divorce lawyer that he needs to get a lawyer in LA or he will lose custody over Henry and pay the maximum amount of alimony. Charlie leaves the company unsupervised and races to Los Angeles to find a divorce lawyer. Once there he picks up Henry so he can spend some time with his son. Once he arrives at the first lawyer's office, the divorce lawyer explains to him that she unfortunately cannot help him since Nicole has already had a meeting with her which goes against policy. This is when Charlie realizes Nicole has had an appointment with nearly all divorce lawyers to force Charlie to hire one of the lesser admirable ones. In figure 7 Charlie just arrived to drop off Henry after visiting divorce lawyers together.

This moment in the film feels like Nicole controlling Charlie, forcing him to leave his company to go to Los Angeles and making sure he has a second-rate divorce lawyer. Despite the way Charlie feels like Nicole is controlling him to 'win' the divorce, Nicole feels the opposite. She explains how Charlie has always controlled her in their marriage, making his choices seem like the only option and her wishes always be a compromise. Not only did he control her in this way, he cheated on Nicole with his assistant who works at the same theater company as Nicole and Charlie. Nicole learned of his infidelity right before deciding to get a first-rate divorce lawyer and fighting for custody of Henry. This is an example of control in both directions. Later in the film, while the divorce lawyers are personally attacking their clients, Nicole and Charlie realize that this obsession with control and winning is only harming them.

The theme agency is one of the most crucial parts of the male gaze, despite the word 'gaze' being part of the word. In the eight movies I have analyzed there were three movies where agency was problematic and matching to Mulvey's (1975) definition of agency in films where the male gaze is present. The first film is *Babygirl* (2024), which has also been criticized for being anti-feminist. A powerful woman CEO being dominated, manipulated and humiliated by a male intern does match the description of male agency that leaves the female characters as passive. However, since Halina Reijn clarified that the main character Romy decides herself to be dominated, this could be seen as self-determination, which would mean that Romy has agency. In my opinion, this could have been a feminist film for this exact reason, but as previously mentioned, there is one reason why it does feel like Romy lacks agency. Her growing up in a cult and being manipulated her whole life leads to her agency in choosing to be dominated is ambiguous at best. Agency-wise, *Babygirl* partially matches the

agency described in literature but also contains uncertain female self-determination. The other themes need to be discussed in addition to agency to be able to define if the male gaze occurs in *Babygirl*.

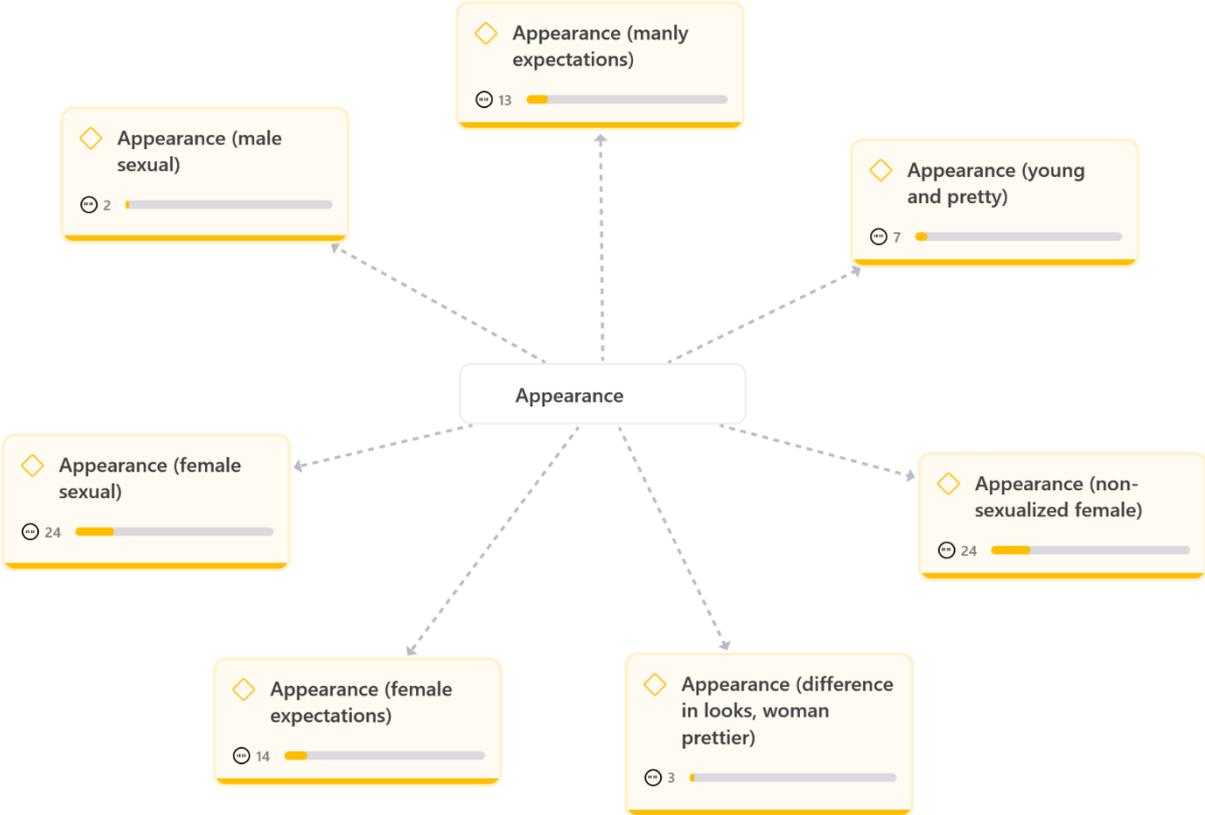
The second film where agency matches the description from literature surrounding agency in the male gaze is *About Time* (2013). Since the main character Tim can travel back in time in the film, this gives way to situations where Tim has the power to decide for and manipulate the female characters in the movie. Not only are his time travel powers mostly used to manipulate the women he meets into liking him, Mary, the woman he marries is a passive character that exists to fill up the space surrounding Tim. She does not determine her own life, nor does she make any choices surrounding their wedding. She exists to give Tim a goal in the film, finding a partner and getting married. Charlotte, the first girl Tim falls for in the film, is also a passive character that is supposed to demonstrate how eager Tim is to find a partner. Once Charlotte arrives at Tim's parents' house for the summer, she is mostly shown as a beautiful woman that Tim is obsessed with. Tim keeps going back in time to re-attempt his moments with Charlotte, trying to get her to like him. Charlotte seems to be an object that is solely in the foreground to be shown off.

The third film where agency can be seen as skewed dominantly towards the male side is *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012). In this film the main character Pat tries to convince his ex-wife to get back with him. The movie focuses on Pat's journey, since he has bipolar disorder he is seen as different by all other characters. His parents treat him as a child, despite him being 30 years old. One of the symptoms of bipolar disorder is to say things that other people could consider as rude. This manifests itself into Pat being offensively honest with everyone around him. Once he meets Tiffany he keeps telling her she should be ashamed for the amount of partners she had, he also uses her to help him get back with his ex-wife. The agency Pat possesses is one-sided for most of the film. Only in one of the later scenes does Tiffany gain the ability to change the narrative. In a scene where Pat and his dad are fighting about betting on football matches Tiffany comes in and changes both their minds. The agency is one sided in *Silver Linings Playbook*, the female characters are passive for most of the film, only having one scene where the agency is balanced.

Concluding, agency in the female directed movies is, with the exception of *Babygirl* (2024), balanced. As previously mentioned, when agency is either mostly possessed by the female characters or balanced between the male and female characters, this creates a situation that is not the opposite of the male gaze, but an equal way of storytelling. Only two male directed films had agency that was problematically skewed to the male side. *Babygirl* (2024)

is ambiguous in its agency. Even though the film is ridden with male dominant agency, it could be read as feminist self-determination. This makes the male directed films the only films with clear cut male dominant agency as described in literature surrounding the male gaze.

II. *Appearance*



**Figure 8:** Coding Tree of the theme *Appearance* (ATLAS.ti)

Appearance is defined by the people that play the female characters. As described in the definition of the male gaze, actresses who are young and conventionally attractive are cast more often to appeal the male audience. This differs in costume design through the fact that this is based on what the actress looks like and not how she is presented on screen. To analyze whether the actresses in movies were cast purely based on their appearance is a complicated thing to assess. First of all, attractiveness is subjective. Although appearance is a part of the complete definition of the male gaze, it usually goes together with camera work and costume design. For this reason this theme will be further analyzed during the discourse of the other themes. The different codes can be seen in figure 8.

The most clear cut example of the appearance of an actress being used for the benefit of the audience is in *About Time* (2013). Charlotte, played by Margot Robbie, is a friend of the sister

of the main character Tim. She stays with Tim and his parents for the summer. During this time Pat starts to develop a crush on her. The scenes where Charlotte is present are used to convey how pretty Charlotte is and how this makes Tim feel. The first scene with Charlotte is when she arrives at the house and steps out of her car. She is shown in a slow-motion close-up that accentuates her looks, as seen in figure 9. The next shot, seen in figure 10, is of Tim staring at her with his mouth wide open. The camera work here matches the male gaze is more than one way, but this will be discussed in the theme camera work. It is of course impossible to decipher whether Margot Robbie was cast with the objective of casting an attractive woman but it is quite clear that this is the case. In the screenplay of the film, Curtis describes Charlotte as the sexual angel that enters Tim's life (Curtis, 2012, p. 10). This shows that she was cast with the intention of having a sexual or seducing appearance which only goal is to display these qualities to Tim. She is a passive object that solely exists to further along Tim's narrative. Here the appearance of the actress Margot Robbie is used in a manner to accentuate the attractiveness of the character that Tim falls for. She is not just used as a character that shows Tim growth into a man who has sexual tendencies, she is also used as the first female character onto which Tim can test his new time traveling powers. The attractiveness of the character is on the first hand aimed at Tim his eagerness to find a partner. Secondly, in terms of the male gaze, the attractiveness of the actresses that play characters in a film are also utilized to bring visual pleasure to a predominantly male audience.

The rest of the instances in movies where the actresses match the description given in the definition of the male gaze will be discussed in combination with other themes such as camera work and costume design. An actress who is young and attractive does not immediately have to be cast purely based on these characteristics. There is a realistic possibility that the actress is cast not because she is attractive but because she is a good actress, and not cast to visually pleasure the audience. This is however also a double edged sword. If directors are not willingly trying to visually pleasure the audience with the attractiveness of the female characters, beauty standards still exist in the current societal climate. These beauty standards are seen and felt everywhere and are the cause for many mental health problems amongst women (Calogero, 2004, p. 16). Directors are not exempt to standardize their castings based on the current beauty standards for women, male gaze occurring in the film or not (Oschatz et al., 2024, p. 2789). Reverting back to agency, films where women have agency are usually younger women navigating their life and their transition from girls to women. Women that have kids or are older than 50 years old are usually reserved as background characters without any agency. They mostly exist to fill up the

space the male characters occupy while occasionally giving advice. Women who do not meet beauty standards set by society are also more rare to be famous actresses. These beauty standards from the practices of male gaze in film, but also partially from the male gaze in everyday life, which define the current beauty standards.



**Figure 9:** *Still from About Time* (Curtis, 2013)

Charlotte is exiting the car she arrived in



**Figure 10:** *Still from About Time* (Curtis, 2013)

Tim is staring at Charlotte exiting her car

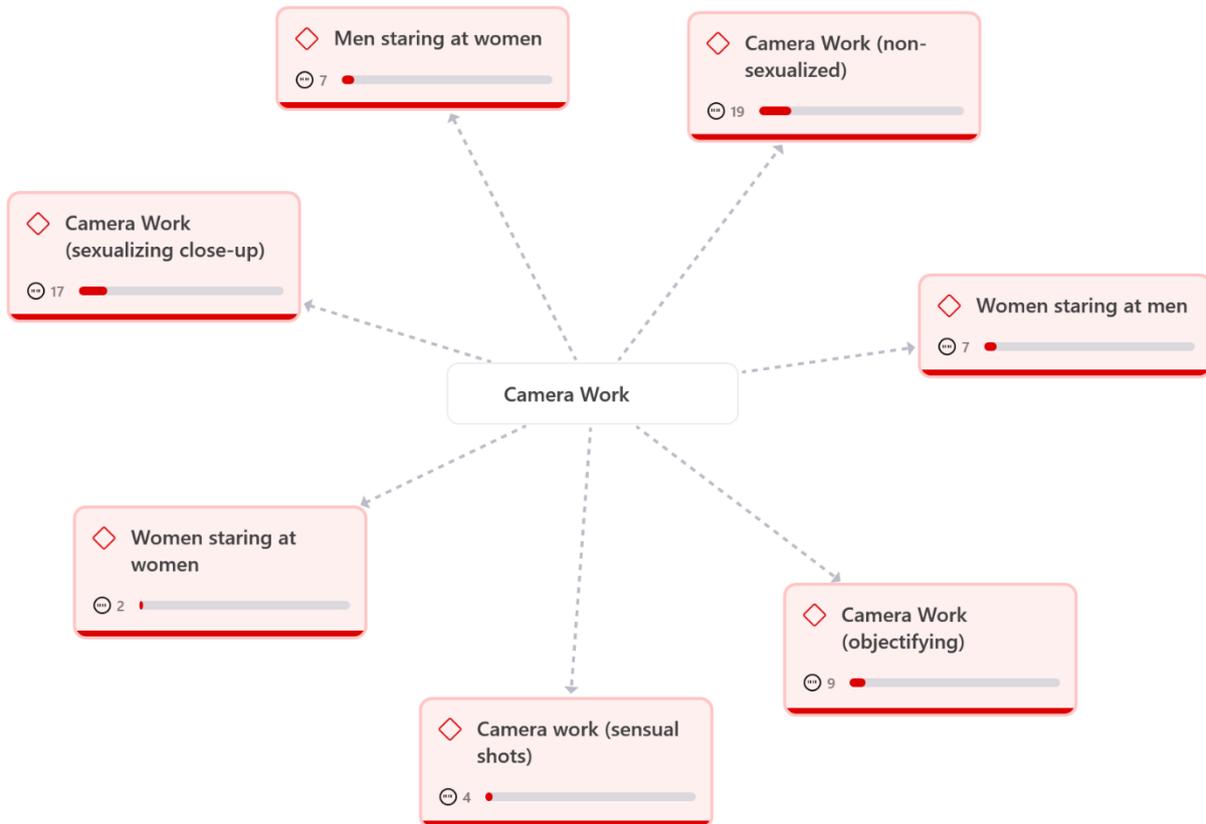
Another common trope in films is the difference in attractiveness between the male and female characters that are romantically involved (Oschatz et al., 2024, p. 2777). This is also the case in the film *About Time* (2013). Again, attractiveness is subjective which makes this theme especially subjective and some arguments are thus partially based on my viewings, ideas and findings during the analysis. In *About Time* Tim tries to get together with Charlotte, she however denies his propositions no matter how many times Tim goes back in time to try it again in another way. She does however tell Tim that she is romantically interested in him but that his approach is wrong. This is an example of the trope in films where the male characters is not as attractive as their romantic partner. Usually these male characters neglect taking care of their own appearance.

Tim and Charlotte do not end up together, this part is reserved for Mary, who is played by Rachel McAdams. Mary is also an attractive woman, though she does not get the same reaction from Tim when they meet as Charlotte got from him. Even so, there is discrepancy between the attractiveness of Tim and Mary. This in itself is not a uncommon thing to occur in real life, it is however problematic that it happens continuously on screen. The opposite occurs only sporadically. Given how the male gaze influences how society sees women and how women see themselves, representation of realistic dynamics on screen also matter. If nearly all couples on screen are of an average attractive man and an attractive woman, this will influence how women see themselves and their potential partners.

As previously mentioned, most of the women cast in films are young, attractive and slim. This part of the male gaze also has consequences for women. As mentioned in the literature review, women have trouble identifying themselves with the characters in films since the female characters lack subjectivity. This is enhanced by the average appearance of female characters on screen. Trying to identify with a character that is more attractive than the average person leads to negative mental health effects. Comparing yourself physically to another person is harmful, which is nearly impossible to avoid when all female characters have to fit the beauty standards.

The discrepancy between the attractiveness of the female and male character is not a malicious thing by itself, it is the fact that it occurs in most movies (Oschatz et al., 2024, p. 2777). It is also a consequence of the male gaze in films where women are mere objects and men are full fleshed subjects. The only film in the eight films that were analyzed where this was evident was *About Time* (2012), which is directed by a man.

### III. *Camera Work*



**Figure 11:** Coding Tree of the theme *Camera Work* (ATLAS.TI)

As mentioned in the definition of the male gaze, camera work in films mostly deals with how the characters are displayed in the shots, as seen in the different codes displayed in figure 11. In movies where the male gaze occurs, the female characters are usually shown in different manners than the male characters. Their body parts are shown through close-ups to accentuate what the audience wants to see. The same thing does not happen to male characters in movies where the male gaze occurs. When there is a close-up of a man, it is either to show his facial expression or to emphasize some object that he is holding or is attached to his body, which is purely done for narrative purposes. Another moment where female characters are shown differently is when they perform actions. These shots are usually put in slow motion to emphasize the movement of their bodies. All other shots where the woman is being sexualized were also included in the codes.

About Time (2012), which also came up in the appearance theme, also uses camera techniques associated with the male gaze. The first scene where this is apparent is the same scene as shown in figure 9 and 10. Charlotte walks out of the car and the close-up of her is meant to portray, as Curtis calls it himself, a sexual angel entering the stage (Curtis, 2012, p. 10). This is not only an example of an objectifying close-up, it is also a moment that is

described by Mulvey (1975) in her original essay. Charlotte is meant to be looked at, we see this in the close-up which accentuates her attractiveness, we also see this in the next shot where Tim is staring at her with his mouth open, accentuating the visceral reaction the audience is supposed to have.

The next part of the film further amplifies objectifying camera techniques. When Tim, his sister Kit Kat and Charlotte are sunbathing in the next scene, Charlotte asks Tim to cover her back with sunscreen, he keenly runs towards her to oblige, as seen in figure 12. Tim is wearing a t-shirt and shorts while Charlotte is wearing a bikini. When Tim comes over, he accidentally squeezes the whole sunscreen bottle on her back, which is likely an innuendo for Tim's eagerness to be with Charlotte. This way the camera does not have to be a close-up of her body parts, but can use more innocent shots in a sexualizing manner to get the point across. Tim goes back in time afterwards to try the moment again, circling back to the agency Tim's character possesses which Charlotte's character lacks. The next time he tries the moment, he acts extremely nonchalant, trying to negate his keenness the first time. He also very carefully opens the sunscreen bottle, making sure he does not embarrass himself.



**Figure 12:** *Still from About Time* (Curtis, 2013)

Tim accidentally empties a sunscreen bottle on Charlotte's back

The most clear cut example of camera work that corresponds to the male gaze is the next scene in *About Time* (2013). Tim, Charlotte, Kit Kat and Tim's friend who is also staying over are going towards the beach to play a tennis match. During this tennis match Tim talks about

how it is unfair that he cannot focus on anything in his life anymore with Charlotte around. At this moment a compilation is shown of Charlotte playing tennis and jumping. This compilation has close-ups of Charlotte's body and is played in slow motion, highlighting the movement of Charlotte's body. Which is the reason why Tim says he is unable to focus on anything anymore. The moment is also exemplified by the music that is playing simultaneously. A sensual slow jazz song is playing in the background. This scene clearly objectifies Charlotte and her body and denounces her into nothing more than a distraction for Tim. In one of the shots Tim is seen staring at Charlotte, then putting his hand in his air in despair because of the extreme emotions he feels. Bringing back the agency and appearance themes, Charlotte never voices her own opinion. This is combined with her attractiveness, the way slow motion and close-ups are used to exemplify this, and the reaction the main character Tim has to her being there. This all leads to the male gaze being apparent in *About Time*, at least when analyzing for the themes; agency, appearance and camera work.

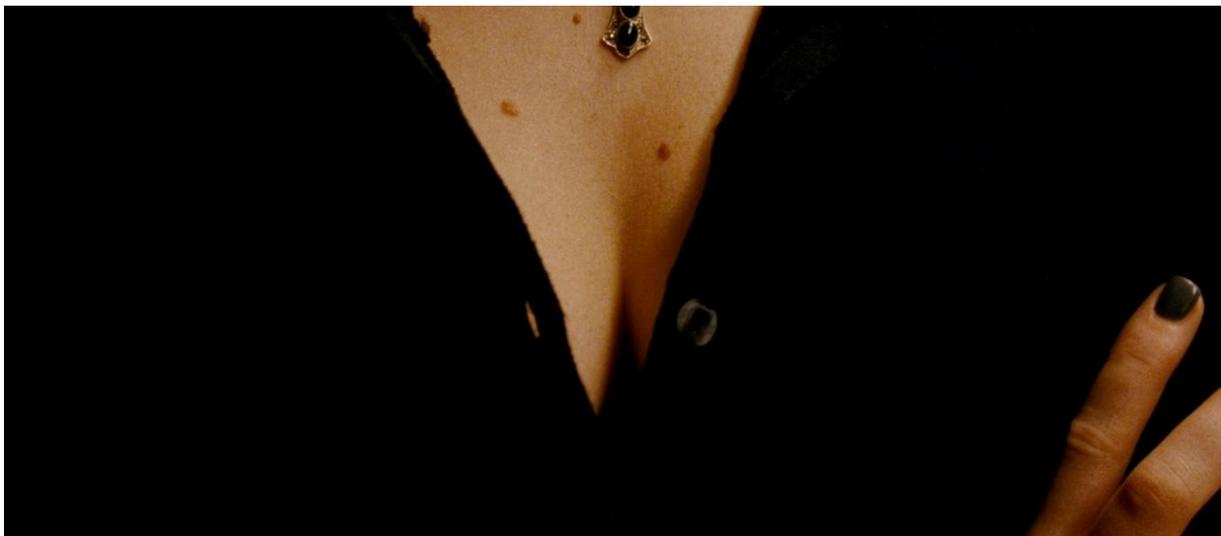


**Figure 13:** *Still from About Time* (Curtis, 2013)

Charlotte is jumping after winning a point which is shown in slow motion

*Babygirl* (2024) has multiple scenes where the characters have intercourse. These moments are usually shot in a way where nothing that is happening is visible. The main character Romy is seen being degraded and humiliated by the intern she is having an affair with, Samuel. These humiliations usually involve Romy acting like a dog and Samuel pretending he is her owner. From an agency perspective, this is dominant male agency that Halina Reijn has tried

to convey as self-determination by Romy wherein she chooses to be humiliated. The camera work during these moments never shows Romy in the same sexualizing manner that *About Time* (2013) shows the character Charlotte. Even though the situation Romy is in is degrading towards her, it is filmed in a manner that shows the intimacy between Romy and Samuel. This intimacy however, has Romy being subdominant towards Samuel which is humiliating for her. To bring it back to the theme appearance, Romy is played by Nicole Kidman, who is an attractive woman but not as young as most women are who are cast for their appearance to appeal to the male gaze. This combined with the camera work that does not accentuate Romy's body or show her in an sexualizing manner, at least partially, makes *Babygirl* a film that has insignificant occurrences of the male gaze, and can thus not be qualified as a movie where the male gaze is present as of yet. Once the other themes have been discussed, a different conclusion might be drawn.



**Figure 14:** *Still from Silver Linings Playbook* (Russell, 2012)

Close-up shot of Tiffany's chest

The only other film where the camera work was objectifying and corresponded to the male gaze literature was *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012). When the main character Pat has just started reintegrating into society, he is invited by an old friend of his, Ronnie, to have dinner with him and his wife. Pat declines at first, explaining how Ronnie's wife, Veronica, is controlling towards Ronnie. He says his wife keeps his balls in her purse. He also mentions that Veronica hates him and that he is quite sure she would never invite him into her home. It seems that Pat's bipolar disorder in combination with the trauma of separating from his ex-wife, Nikki, had led him to automatically believe the worst in people, especially married women. This trauma derives from how Pat and Nikki broke up. Pat once walked in on Nikki

and another teacher from the school they both work at having intercourse in the shower in their house. Pat freaked out and assaulted the other teacher, which led him to go to a mental institution on a court order. Even though he was angry, he never blames Nikki for what happened, it did amplify the symptoms of his bipolar disorder. In the entire movie it is quite obvious how different Pat is from the other characters. Everybody is very careful around him, afraid to set him off. Pat also speaks his mind continuously, which usually contains harmful vulgar language. In the scene where the shot from figure 14 derives from, Pat meets Tiffany. When he is at Ronnie's house for dinner, Veronica has also invited her sister Tiffany. Tiffany has been recently widowed and has borderline personality disorder. She is also the only character who is not afraid to speak her mind to Pat in this movie, which when looking at agency, should give her the ability to also direct the narrative. This is however only the case in certain scenes, as previously mentioned, Pat mostly decides in which direction the movie progresses. When Pat and Tiffany meet, he immediately stares at her chest, which is accentuated by a close-up camera shot which lingers for a few seconds before showing her nail polish. Pat compliments her on how she looks but immediately retracts it explaining how he is still in love with his ex-wife.



**Figure 15:** *Still from About Time (Curtis, 2013)*

Women's dresses are blown up by the wind during the wedding

One other example from *About Time* (2013) which blatantly uses women's bodies as a way to visually pleasure the male audience is during the wedding of Tim and Mary. When Tim and

Mary exit the church to go down to the party area the beach, a storm rises up through which all the characters can be seen running. When three women are seen from behind, as shown in figure 15, the camera films them in slow motion. Their dresses are blown up by the wind, resulting in the fact that their underwear is visible. It is quite clear that this does not have any purpose for the narrative, in an earlier shot Tim and Mary are seen being rained on, which would have sufficed to get the point of the bad weather across. It seems to be a moment that is constructed purely for the benefit of the male audience, visual pleasure.



**Figure 16:** Still from *Lady Bird* (Gerwig, 2017)

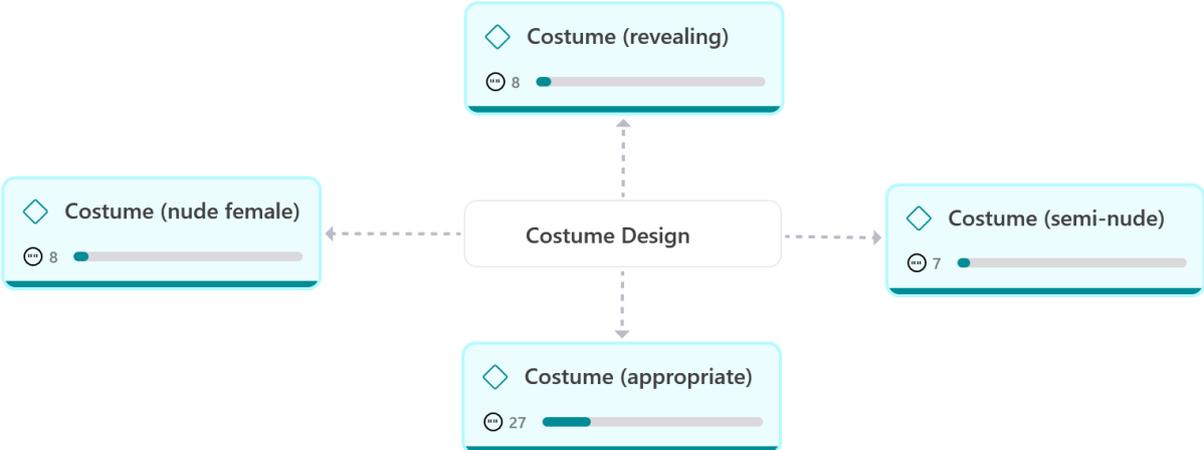
Lady Bird and her friend are swimming in a pool

To give an example of a moment in a movie where the male gaze regularly would have been used but is not, is in *Lady Bird* (2017). When Lady Bird visits her friend Jenna and they go swimming together, they are shot from both above and under the water. This usually results in shots of female characters in bikinis to show their bodies to the camera. Since the characters in *Lady Bird* are meant to be somewhere between 17 and 18, this would be inappropriate. Greta Gerwig decided to ascertain that any shot of them swimming was showing off the moment the characters were having and not their bodies. This is clearly seen in the shot of figure 16 which shows Lady Bird and Jenna from underwater with smiles on their faces.

For the theme camera work, only two movies correspond to the definition of the male gaze in their shots. These films are *About Time* (2013) and *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012). Both of these movies were directed by a man, compared to all female directed movies having no shots that were objectifying or overly sexualizing female characters. The only female

directed film which showed a lot of sexual scenes was *Babygirl* (2024), this film never sexualized the main character Romy through the camera work. She was covered by either clothing or blocking of other objects in the scene. For a film to focus on humiliation and degradation, it must have been intentional that Romy was never overly sexualized by the camera. Halina Reijn focused on the meaning of humiliation and control in the narrative, without showing the main character to the audience in a ‘pleasurable’ way. This concludes camera work that corresponds to the male gaze as something that only occurs in films directed by men, while not being present in films directed by women.

IV. *Costume Design*



**Figure 17:** Coding Tree of the theme *Costume Design* (ATLAS.ti)

The next theme that was deduced from literature is costume design. As seen in figure 17, the theme coding design only contains four codes. This is because the theme is closely linked to the themes appearance and camera work but only focuses on what the female characters are wearing. In films where the male gaze is present, the outfits the female characters wear can be tight, revealing or sexual in other ways without this being logical towards the narrative. In the definition of the male gaze derived from literature, male gaze costume design mostly deals with the discrepancy between what the male and female characters are wearing. When the female characters wear revealing clothing but men are also just wearing swimming shorts, this is not a situation where the male gaze occurs by definition. This depends, just as with the theme appearance, on how the female character is shown to the audience, bringing it back to the camera work. This is why the themes appearance, camera work and costume design are closely linked. If the female character wears revealing clothing, is semi-nude or completely nude, this is a more clear indication that the costume design has been catered towards the male gaze. The trope of women wearing more revealing clothing is something that mostly

occurs in action movies. Since I analyzed drama films for my thesis, the costume design for all movies was more mild in its differences and sexual nature.

One of the examples of revealing costume design is in *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012). As seen in figure 14, the outfit that Tiffany wears is not especially revealing. The problem here lies in the emphasis that the camera gives to her zooming in on her chest. In the next shot it is also clear that Pat was staring at her chest during the three seconds of the close-up. While Tiffany's outfit is not problematic, it is clear that the director had the intention of this outfit being something that invokes a reaction in Pat. Similar to how Charlotte arriving in *About Time* (2013) was supposed to give Tim a reaction of sexual desire. This shows that even though the outfit is in itself not too revealing, the context of the scene, including the camera work and the reaction of other characters, can make an outfit suddenly feel sexual through the male gaze.



**Figure 18:** *Still from Silver Linings Playbook* (Russell, 2012)

Tiffany looking at Pat while having dinner in a diner

Another scene where the difference in costume design is apparent is when Pat and Tiffany have dinner together at a diner halfway through the movie. In this scene Tiffany tries to explain her difficulties to Pat, thinking he will understand having been through similar things. Bringing this scene back to the theme agency, Pat listens to her but mostly focuses on what he wants to hear. Tiffany explains how before her husband died, she did not feel up to intercourse for various mental reasons, this always hurt her husband. After he died, she grieved by trying to sleep with as many people as possible, especially people whom she worked with. Pat steers

the conversation towards his interests, asking her if she has ever been with a woman. This is another example of the movie having skewed agency where Pat tries to be in control of the situations he is in. When Tiffany asks him if he can understand her, he tells her that he is not as crazy as her, and that he does not want to be compared to her. Again, deciding where the conversation goes and solidifying his position as superior. The movie does address this later, but this is mostly done through Tiffany getting emotional and Pat trying to calm her down, which is not an example of female agency.

In the dinner scene depicted in figure 18 and 19, the different outfits of Pat and Tiffany can be seen. Tiffany is wearing a top that is cut low, which makes it slightly revealing. This is not an extreme outfit for a dinner but compared to Pat's outfit there is a big difference. Pat is wearing a t-shirt and a jacket on top, this outfit is extremely casual and covers him up completely. Compared to Tiffany's outfit there is a big difference in how revealing it is.



**Figure 19:** *Still from Silver Linings Playbook* (Russell, 2012)

Pat looking at Tiffany while having dinner in a diner

The next point which can be made about *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012) is a combination of the themes appearance, camera work and costume design. During one of the final scenes where Tiffany and Pat perform together during the dance contest, the outfit that Tiffany wears is quite tight on her, showing off her body in a way that Pat's outfit does not have. For a dance contest it is quite usual for women to wear tighter clothes for flexibility. It however seems to be the case here that the outfit choice is intentionally made by the director to make Tiffany a more visually appealing character. This has two main goals, Pat is dancing with Tiffany to impress

his ex-wife Jenna who is also at the dance. Having Tiffany be a visual pleasure for him to look at and dance with convinces him he would rather be with Tiffany than Jenna. The second reason seems to be bring visual pleasure to the audience. The way this can be derived has to do with both the appearance of Tiffany and the camera work. First of all, Tiffany is played by Jennifer Lawrence. She is a famous and talented actress who is both young and attractive. Since Tiffany is supposed to be a woman who is notorious for having slept with a lot of men, it seems likely that David O. Russell cast Jennifer Lawrence to make certain that the character was attractive to both the audience and the main character Pat. The second way the costume design adds to the presence of the male gaze is how she is shown. The first shot where Pat and Tiffany dance next to each other shows Tiffany making moves that mostly are meant to show the movements of her body parts, as seen in figure 20. This is quite subtle but in the next shot seen in figure 21 the camera randomly pans down and shows a close-up of Tiffany's behind. Adding the appearance of Tiffany, the camera work showing her behind in a close-up and the costume design together adds up to an undeniable presence of the male gaze in *Silver Linings Playbook*. As previously mentioned, this film was directed by a man.

It seems that the character of Tiffany was meant as a way to show how women who have had multiple partners are not inferior. The problem however is that the way in which David O. Russell show Tiffany makes her feel more like an object to be looked at than a woman with agency whose past decisions are hers to make and do not define her as a person. David O. Russell tries to show it as character redemption instead of self-determination, which is the difference between male and female agency, since male agency decided that having a lot of partners is a bad thing. The agency Tiffany has been given to her in this film is the ability to forgive herself for the number of partners she has had in the past, or as Pat calls it: "forgiving herself for being a whore". This agency seems to limit her to a person who will always be haunted by something that is laid upon her by societal pressure. If Tiffany possessed agency she would be able to decide for herself that having multiple partners in a short time is not something malicious. The fact that it is seen as a big mistake that needs to be forgiven points to male agency deciding what women are and are not supposed to do. This form of agency can be seen in the scene where Pat converses with his therapist about Tiffany. He tells his therapist that: "Tiffany has forgiven herself for being a whore", his therapist then suggests to him that he should help Tiffany become a better person so that his ex-wife Nikki can see how much of a better person he has become. She is seen as an object that needs to be fixed, but only because fixing her comes with its benefits for Pat.



**Figure 20:** *Still from Silver Linings Playbook* (Russell, 2012)

Pat and Tiffany dancing during the dance contest



**Figure 21:** *Still from Silver Linings Playbook* (Russell, 2012)

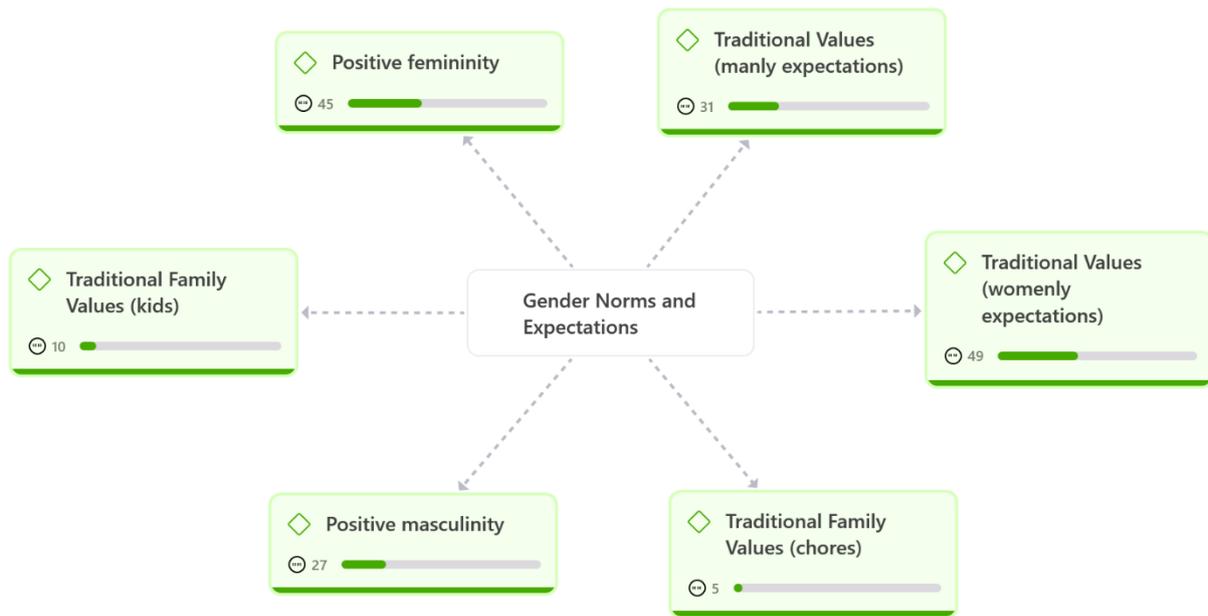
Close-up of Tiffany's behind during the dance

The only other film where costume design was partially linked to the definition of the male gaze as derived from literature is *About Time* (2013). In the scenes as seen in figure 12 and 13, Charlotte is used as an object which is meant to attract the main character Tim. In figure 12 Charlotte is sunbathing, this means that her wearing a bikini is a logical outfit choice. Similar to *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012) the problem lies in the combination of the appearance, camera work and the costume design. Tim, in the same scene, is wearing a t-shirt

and shorts which cover him up completely. The discrepancy between their outfits creates the effect of visual pleasure that only Charlotte's character is meant to evoke. This is combined with the camera work that is a low shot showing her from behind. Charlotte is, as previously mentioned, played by an attractive young woman which adds up to all these choices being made to visually pleasure the audience. Which is the definition of the male gaze. During the scene seen in figure 13, Charlotte is playing tennis in an outfit that is appropriate for the situation. Here the detail lies in the camera work combined with the outfit. The shirt she is wearing is tight and the slow motion shots accentuate her bodily movements. The outfit she wears allows a lot to be seen in this situation, which is again a combination of themes of the male gaze coming together to create visual pleasure for a male audience.

Overall, the costume design only corresponded to the definition of the male gaze derived from literature in two films, *About Time* (2013) and *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012). The films directed by women had appropriate costume design for their intended purposes. *Babygirl* (2024) has multiple scenes which are graphic in nature, despite this, Halina Reijn never dressed the main character Romy in anything too revealing, especially compared to her opposing character Samuel. Just like with the camera work, Romy is degraded in a narrative sense by Samuel, not by the camera or her outfits. For the first four themes it seems that the movies directed by men are the only ones where the male gaze occurs. There two movies directed by men which so far did not have any occurrences of the male gaze, *Marriage Story* (2019) and *The Worst Person In The World* (2021). The reason these films differ from the other movies directed by men could be because of a theme that has not been discussed yet. This will be further discussed in a later section

## V. Gender Norms and Expectations



**Figure 22:** Coding Tree of the theme Gender Norms and Expectations (ATLAS.ti)

The theme gender norms and expectations did not derive from literature. This is one of the themes that was deduced from the codes, seen in figure 22, that did not match any of the other themes. This means that this theme does not completely occur in the definition of the male gaze that was used to analyze the eight films. Despite this, the codes within this theme match the literature surrounding the male gaze in a different way. This theme mostly sees to patriarchal expectations of characters, in films where the male gaze is present, a heterosexual normalization is present. This heterosexual culture has its own societal norms which men and women should meet. This ranges from having kids to a man having to be a man. Men tend to act more masculine when the characters they see on screen act masculine and threaten their masculinity, also called heterosexual self-presentation (Parent & Cooper, 2020, p. 290). This theme analyses if these manly expectations happen in movies where the male gaze occurs, linking heterosexual self-presentation with the male gaze.

Furthermore, the expectations to which the female characters are being held also occur in the male gaze. An example of this is Tiffany's character in *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012). Tiffany is judged for the amount of partners she has been with since her husband passed away. The expectation of her to live this lifestyle is an example of the expectations women deal with in society. Pat, the main character, is also quite judgmental towards her past dealings with men. During his therapy session he thinks it is weird she has forgiven herself for it, while also asking her questions about who she has been with when they are together, clearly being interested. The fact she has to forgive herself for something that is only seen as a mistake by

societal norms laid out for women is an example of the code: Traditional Values (Female Expectations).



**Figure 23:** Still from *The Worst Person In The World* (Trier, 2021)

Aksel is explaining to Julie that he want to have kids now

In the film *The Worst Person In The World* (2021), the things that are expected of women is one of the major themes. This means that there are multiple occurrences of Julie, the main character, dealing with people expecting traditional values of her, even though she feels differently. In the scene depicted in figure 23 Julie and her boyfriend Aksel go to visit some friends of Aksel for a few days. Aksel is 44 years old and about 15 years older than Julie. The friends of Aksel all have children, Julie finds it difficult to engage with the children. Aksel confronts her before they go to bed that she should try to engage with the children more. Julie explains to Aksel that she does not have a maternal instinct, and that she is not sure if she wants children, definitely not at this time. Aksel tells her he wants to have children now, since he is already 44 years old. This scene shows how the expectations laid down on Julie are hard for her. It also depicts how these expectations are not, and should not, be the normality.

The traditional male values are seen in films where the male gaze occurs, an example of this is in *About Time* (2013). In the scene depicted in figure 24 Tim runs into Charlotte a few years after their summer together. Charlotte is with a friend of hers whom she introduces as her girlfriend, meaning her friend who is a girl. Tim is of the understanding that they are gay and a couple. He tells them he is so happy that they are gay, because ever since Charlotte rejected him his masculinity has been fragile. Knowing she is gay can help him be a confident heterosexual man again. Charlotte then tells Tim that they are not a couple and that she is not

gay. Tim then goes back in time to try the moment again. This scene shows the expectations which Tim has for himself. His masculinity is fragile and can be broken by being rejected by a woman. The film makes this scene comedic by making it an awkward situation for Tim but it does not seem to reflect Tim's thoughts as being wrong. The traditional heterosexual expectations of man are present in this film

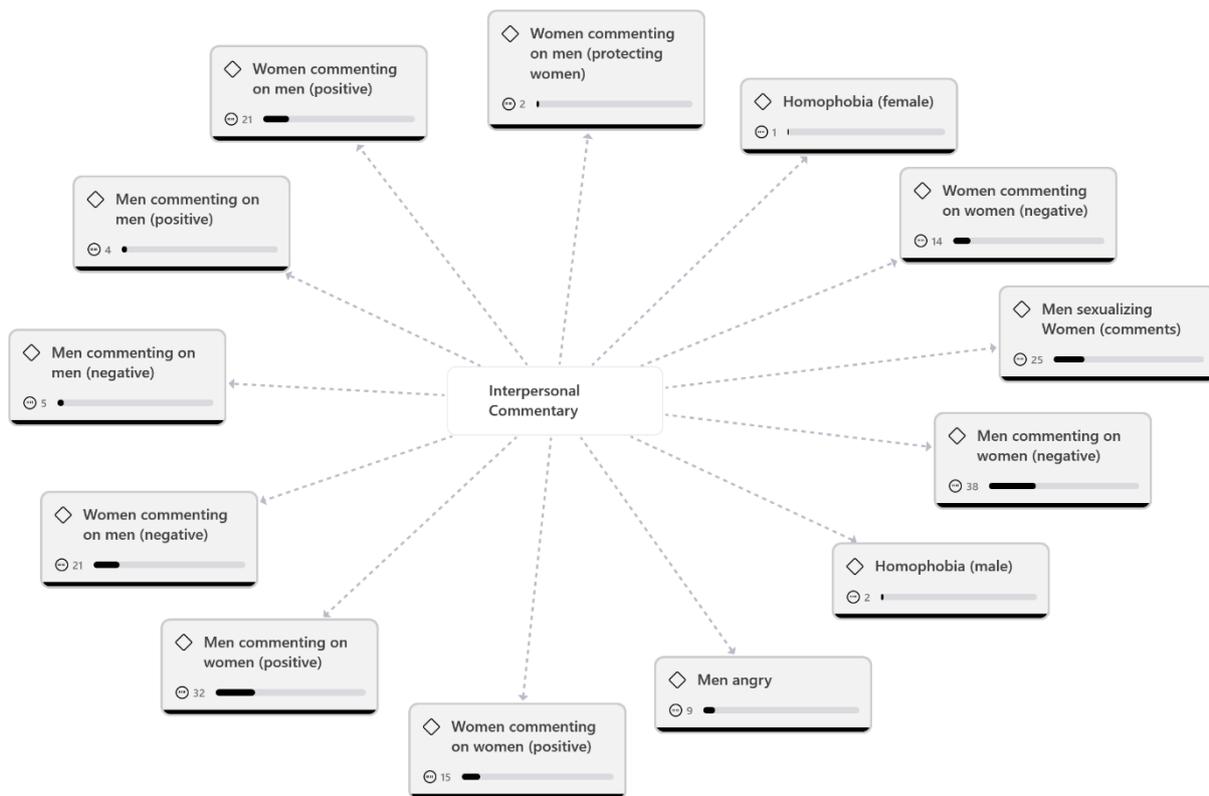


**Figure 24:** *Still from About Time* (Curtis, 2013)

Tim meets Charlotte and her friend

While this theme does not define if the male gaze occurs in a film, it does make a connection. In the films that were analyzed, traditional patriarchal expectations were only present and undisputed in the two films where the male gaze is also present, *About Time* (2013) and *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012). This shows that the male gaze in film is usually connected to patriarchal traditional norms which the male and female characters must meet. For masculinity this can have an effect on male viewers who want to mirror this behavior. In the other six films, these patriarchal norms were either absent or present and disputed. This shows a key difference between films where the male gaze occurs and the once where it does not. Though this difference cannot be completely linked to the gender of the director.

## VI. *Interpersonal Commentary*



**Figure 25:** *Coding Tree of the theme Interpersonal Commentary (ATLAS.ti)*

The theme interpersonal commentary is a theme that was derived from the coding process and not from the literature. This theme mostly deals with the comments made by characters about other characters, as seen in the codes in figure 25. This does not directly concern with the male gaze, but some codes here are important parts of the male gaze. The code that regards men sexualizing women through comments can be linked to the agency these male characters possess and try to take away from the female characters. It can also be an example of male characters revealing their feelings about female characters without it having to be shown through camera work. This is also why it is the least subtle way the male gaze can occur in films.

One film which has a good example of how commentary of a character can make the occurrences of the male gaze less subtle is *About Time* (2013). After the scene depicted in figure 24 Tim and his friend, Rory, are standing outside wanting to go home, as seen in figure 26. Charlotte then walks out with her friend and walks up to Tim. After Charlotte and her friend walk away we see Rory staring at them. He then tells Tim that if he were to have sex with Charlotte he would need to be blind, because if he would see her bare chest he would

explode. This comment in combination with him staring at Charlotte creates an uncomfortable malicious example of the male gaze.

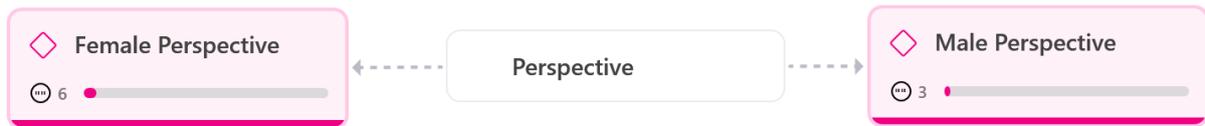


**Figure 26:** *Still from About Time* (Curtis, 2013)

Tim and Rory are staring at Charlotte and her friend

Overall, this theme adds to the male gaze by heightening what the camera is showing of female characters through commentary. In the two films where the male gaze was present, multiple sexualizing comments were present that were degrading towards the female characters. In *Booksmart* (2019) there is a scene where one of the main characters Molly is sexualized by two guys who she can hear from her bathroom stall. She then walks out of the stall and confronts the guys about what they said. This shows that even though these sexualizing comments are present in films where the male gaze is absent, it involves it being used as an example of negative moments that should not define the female characters. In *About Time* (2013) and *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012) the sexualizing comments added to how prevalent the presence of the male gaze was in the films. The other codes did not directly connect to the male gaze and were supplementary to the overall theme to put scenes in perspective which helped with analyzing. Another thing to note is that there were no instances of women sexualizing men through comments, even in the films where the male gaze was absent. This shows that the opposite of the male gaze is not the objectification of men, nor do women sexualize men in films where the male gaze occurs.

## VII. *Perspective*



**Figure 27:** *Coding Tree of the theme Perspective (ATLAS.ti)*

The last theme that was derived from literature is the perspective from which the movie was written, either male or female. This theme does not have any supplementary codes, and is purely based on whether a male or female perspective was used for the narrative, as seen in figure 27. All the films directed by women were written from a female perspective. It is important to note that the male was absent in all these films. The only exception is in *Babygirl* (2024) where the agency of Romy is ambiguous. Considering all other themes did not occur in a way that matches the male gaze in this film, it is most probable that the agency is the only thing that points towards the male gaze. This still does not completely define it as a film where the male gaze occurs, since Romy did decide on her own that she wants to be dominated by Samuel.

The four films directed by men differ in many ways from the female directed movies. Two of the four films were written from a male perspective, *About Time* (2013) and *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012). These films were also the only films where the male gaze is present. All themes that were analyzed matched the definition of the male gaze in these two films, making it altogether evident that the male gaze is present in these films. In the other two films directed by men the male gaze was absent. The difference here lies in the perspective. *The Worst Person In The World* (2021) was written from a female perspective, while *Marriage Story* (2019) was written from both a male and female perspective. This is an indication that the male gaze occurs mostly in films directed by men, but that when a male director directs a movie that was written from a female perspective, the male gaze is absent. This could be because of the subjectivity and agency the female character has, giving the director the perspective to change how women are shown in the film. Since the male gaze mostly turns the female characters into objects, it is a logical consequence that once these characters have agency and subjectivity the way they are treated in the film changes.

## **Discussion**

The literature surrounding the male gaze created a definition which I have used to analyze eight films directed by men and women. In my analysis this definition closely resonates with my findings. The first important point, agency, seems to have key role in how a film is shaped (Mulvey, 1975, p. 7). Her idea of women being the bearers and not the makers of meaning match the findings concerning the film *About Time* (2013). Charlotte bares meaning for Tim, she is the first crush Tim develops and an object onto which he can project his lust. She does not have agency to decide for herself.

A thing Mulvey (1975), Doane (1982) and Ponterotto (2016) do not mention is what happens if the agency between the female and male characters is either equal or skewed towards the female side. In my analysis I found that films where female agency is dominant, the opposite of the male gaze does not occur. Men are not objectified in the way women are in films where the male gaze is present. These films are usually equal in how men and women are shown. They both either possess agency or have their own impact on the story without them being an object, which differs from women's roles in movies where the male gaze occurs.

Another thing missing from the literature surrounding the male gaze is what happens to men that watch films where the male gaze is present. There is research on how women have to deal with male characters being the protagonists, and women having passive roles (Doane, 1982, p. 80). Some research exists on how men behave when they see masculine men on screen, which mostly results in men being fragile in their masculinity and mirroring characters on screen (Parent & Cooper, 2020, p. 290). In my research I did not have the focus on researching how the male gaze impacts men that are subjected to films with it present. More research on this topic and if it boosts hyper masculinity should be done. In our current society hyper masculinity and misogyny seems to be rising, it would be important to research if the male gaze amplifies this.

Since the definition I used in my research was derived from literature, it helped to make sure all films would be analyzed in the same manner. Two new themes did arise that are not directly mentioned in literature but do concern the male gaze. In my analysis I found that patriarchal traditional expectations are present in films where the male gaze occurs. These traditional values did not occur in films where the male gaze was absent, or it was used as a plot point which was disputed by the characters with agency. If these traditional values in films where the male gaze is present have negative implications on viewers and their views on society should be further researched.

One of the less clear occurrences of the male gaze was in my analysis of *Babygirl* (2024). In this film, the main character Romy has an affair with her intern. Her intern dominates her in their relationship, which gives him all agency. Since Romy determined for herself to be dominated, it is ambiguous if she has agency or not. The director Halina Reijn explained that Romy has the agency to decide she wants to be dominated and humiliated, since it is her own choice it proves that she does possess agency. This is plausible, but as mentioned in the results section, the fact that she grew up in a cult makes it harder to believe she possesses agency concerning choices about being dominated. She has been manipulated her entire life which creates doubt surrounding her decisions concerning herself.

Furthermore, drawing on Mulvey's (1975) idea that women in film are often denied the ability to make meaning, Romy's apparent choice to be dominated can be seen not as authorship of her narrative, but as a continuation of gendered power structures under the guise of control. This is complicated further by Romy's personal history, as mentioned in the results section, she grew up in a cult, which suggests long-term manipulation and coercive conditioning. Her capacity for autonomous decision-making, especially in intimate relationships, must therefore be critically questioned through the lens of Snow (1989), who argues that the male gaze becomes internalized and can shape how women perceive themselves and their desires.

Doane's (1982) theory on masquerade is also applicable to this film. Romy's submission could be read as performed femininity, a strategic negotiation within a system that rewards her for playing a particular role. This reading introduces ambiguity: is Romy resisting or reinforcing the male gaze? Kaplan (1983) argues that female subjectivity under patriarchal visual regimes is often shaped by internal contradictions. Even when women seem to act freely, they may be responding to structures that limit what forms of subjectivity are legible or acceptable.

Through the lens of intersectionality, as articulated by Nash (2008), Romy's actions cannot be seen in isolation from her social positioning and past trauma. Her experiences are shaped not just by gender but by psychological history, power relations, and cultural expectations. Intersectional theory asks us to consider how these concepts interact and problematize the assumption that the ability to decide something equates to genuine agency. In this way, Romy's story demonstrates the difficulty of agency in modern cinema: is she free, or is she simply navigating oppression in a way that looks like freedom?

Since this research is based on a thematic analysis of only eight films the findings are not definitive. More research should be done on how male and female directors

differ concerning the male gaze. Research on films directed by women but written from a male perspective should also be done, focusing on if the male gaze occurs in these films. More importantly, more research should be done on the real-world impacts the male gaze has on the masculinity men portray to their surroundings. With the current uprising of old fashioned malicious values that are misogynistic in nature, it is vital to determine what the cause is.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I tried to answer the following question:

- *How does the male gaze differ in movies directed by male directors or female directors?*

This question has been answered through the use of a thematic analysis which was done assisted by a definition derived from literature by Mulvey (1975), Doane (1982), Hooks (1992) and Ponterotto (2016). First I watched all eight films while making notes and remarks about which codes could derive from these notes. Then these notes were analyzed in ATLAS.ti, creating a total of 51 codes. These codes were then grouped together in seven themes. The difference in the films concerning these themes were then further worked out which resulted in the following findings.

Films directed by men and women differ in multiple major themes. The most important difference is that of all eight films there were only two films where the male gaze was present, *About Time* (2013) and *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012), both of these films were directed by men. The other two films directed by men where the male gaze were absent differed in their perspective. These films were written either partially or fully from a female perspective compared to the films where the male gaze was present, which were written from a male perspective. It seems that films where the main character is female and she thus possesses subjectivity and agency negates the presence of the male gaze. However, it is important to acknowledge that authorship is complex. While this study emphasizes the role of director gender and narrative perspective, other factors, such as the genre of the film, studio demands, and the gender of the cinematographer, could also shape how the male gaze appears. For instance, romantic comedies may more commonly feature traditional gender dynamics and objectifying camera work regardless of the director's gender. Similarly, cinematographers and editors significantly influence visual style, and their role in reinforcing or resisting the male gaze warrants further investigation. These alternative interpretations call for future research to deepen and nuance the analysis.

The two films where the male gaze was present differed from the other films in a few key concepts. Firstly, the agency that the characters possess. In *About Time* (2013) and *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012) the male main characters were the only characters to possess agency. The female characters were mainly used as bearers of meaning that help progress the narrative as objects instead of subjects. This was usually paired with the fact the female characters were played by attractive young women, helping elevate the visual pleasure the

audience would experience. In the female perspective and directed films the agency was either equal between the male and female characters or dominant on the female side. This did not result in the opposite of the male gaze, male characters were not objectified or sexualized in films where there was dominant female agency.

The camera work differed between the male and female directed films. The two movies directed by man with a female perspective did not have objectifying camera work. The movies where the male gaze was present did have objectifying camera work. Close-ups of female characters' body parts and slow motion shots of these characters jumping, showing the movement of their body parts. In *Babygirl* (2024), a female directed film, the main character is never sexualized by the camera work. Her body is even blocked off by other objects on screen to diminish the sexuality of the scene.

Concerning costume design there is a key difference between the movies where male gaze was either absent or present. In the female perspective and directed films the outfits of the female characters was never revealing in a sexualizing way. The outfit choices matched between the male and female characters. In *About Time* (2013) and *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012) the female characters usually wore more revealing outfits than the male characters. This was paired with camera work that objectified them, which was completely absent in female directed films.

*About Time* (2013) and *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012) had traditional values interwoven in the films. The characters are held to standards that are present in a patriarchal society. In the female directed films this was either absent or used as a plot device to create discourse about it. *About Time* and *Silver Linings Playbook* used interpersonal commentary to further sexualize the female characters the other films did not have this occur without it also being done on purpose to create discourse.

The most important difference found in my analysis concerned the perspective from which the film was written. The two movies where the male gaze occurs, *About Time* (2013) and *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012), were both written from a male perspective. All the other films where the male gaze was absent were either fully or partially written from a female perspective. While this is a significant pattern, it is important not to imply that female authorship inherently prevents objectification. As Kaplan (1983) argues, female filmmakers may still operate within patriarchal structures and visual conventions, and thus reproduce similar dynamics. This study suggests that female perspective correlates with reduced male gaze, but does not claim a universal or essentialist rule. Future research should critically examine how female directors differentiate from patriarchal filmmaking.

During the thematic analysis two more themes were found that were not deducted from literature. These themes were mostly supplementary to the male gaze and were connected to the male gaze in a way where these themes were present when the male gaze already occurred but did not define if the male gaze was present in a film.

These findings resonate beyond film theory. The way women are portrayed in cinema has wider implications for how gender, power, and subjectivity are understood in society. The male gaze not only shapes fictional characters but also influences real-world expectations about gender roles, body image, and agency. As Calogero (2004) notes, the psychological effects of objectification emerge even in seemingly neutral media contexts. By examining narrative perspective and camera work, this research contributes to ongoing discussions about how media can either reinforce or challenge cultural norms.

Overall the difference between how the male gaze manifests in films directed by either men or women lies in the perspective. In films written from a female perspective the male gaze tends to be absent. In movies directed by men that are written from a male perspective, the male gaze is often prominent. Women are more likely to be objectified, sexualized and passive, even in drama films.

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