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Subjectivity and Mutuality: Feminist Theology in Film

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Abstract

One of the central concepts in feminist film criticism is that of gaze, also called male gaze: the objectifying lens, both literal and metaphorical, that an assumed default male viewer has through media that depicts women from a masculine point of view. This gaze is constructed as necessarily objectifying; when scholars posit a female gaze, it is sometimes also cast as objectifying, simply swapping the genders of the seer and the seen. I argue that gaze can also be subjectifying through the process of relation between people who hold each other in equal regard and do not assert power one over the other. In both seeing and being seen, there is power to restore agency to the objectified through reciprocal relation. I explore this idea in the context of film, not only as a vehicle of illustration, but also as an interaction between artist and audience, and assert that gaze has equal power to harm or heal, and to reduce or restore agency.

Subjectivity and Mutuality: Feminist Theology in Film

Film has become a near-ubiquitous experience in the modern world. Throughout the life of film as an art form, movies have had both positive and negative impacts on individual viewers and on culture. One of the great harms that is written of in feminist film critique is gaze, that is, an objectifying treatment of people, specifically those within certain social categories, in film that normalizes the objectification of individuals similarly categorized in life. There are very few things that can reasonably be categorized as universally good or bad, and in this paper, I will explore the concept of gaze to find if it is always an objectifying, negative phenomenon, or if it is possible for a gaze to be affirming, positive, and what I call subjectifying. For this exploration, I will primarily examine the films *Babette's Feast* and *Antonia's Line*.

Film as Theology

Film possesses characteristics that make it uniquely suited for exploring the sublime through confrontation with the Other – the very factors that lead some philosophers to fiercely maintain that film could not be art, due to the mechanical nature of the filmmaking process and the assertion that this mechanical process removes the artist's hand from the work, leaving it devoid of artistic expression (Carroll, 2008, pp. 7-8). While these critiques have predominantly been discarded by contemporary scholars, they serve here to highlight a point about film: short of first-person witness, film provides a view that is the closest possible to objective of another human being that can be achieved at the present time, with current technology.

It is easy to see theology in film when addressing films containing religious text or telling a story that is overtly religious, but films that are not explicitly religious can still reveal theological ideas, through what Dan Flory calls film's "broader and more direct access to our automatic and pre-reflective emotional levels" (Flory, 2013). In his book, *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human*, Antonio D. Sison writes, "It is the cinematic imaging of vivid humanity, not necessarily propositional statements about God and religion, that serves as a portal to a conversation with theology" (2012, p. 6). The "vivid humanity" to which Sison refers can be described as the revelation of the human soul, if we may use such language, accessed and experienced through the unique medium of film. Sison explains that film has the power "to trigger the hermeneutical impulse in such a way that theological conversation points arise from an encounter with the resonant humanity unfolding on the silver screen" (p. 5). He goes on to quote Craig Detweiler's work, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century*: "I approach the discipline as 'film and theology,' allowing the films to

drive the conversation, with theology arising out of the art, rather than imposing it within the text. This is the full implication of reversing the hermeneutic flow” (qtd. in Sison, 6). It is through this interface between film and theology that film gains “its capacity to rotate our religious prism so that we become open to “see” different facets of God” (Sison, 2012, p. 6). Take, for example, the film *Babette’s Feast*.

The film centers on the lives of two sisters whose father founded a religious sect. After his death, they continue to try to uphold his work, but their community is dwindling. They take in a French refugee, Babette, who has lost her husband and son in a civil war. Watching the film unfold, the viewer is drawn into the austerity of the deeply pious and ascetic Dutch Protestant community through the filmmaker’s use of color and form: whitewashed houses with dark, unornamented trim, spare interiors that repeat long, straight lines to accentuate the rigidity of the lives that play out in these spaces. Exterior shots are tightly framed on the buildings, or on the storm-tossed North Sea. The dinner sequence, however, is rich with colors, textures, and shapes. The film cuts repeatedly from Babette carefully crafting the meal by hand with a staggering array of ingredients to the Pietistic congregation trying to suppress the joy the meal brings them. As the courses unfold, so, too, do the dinner companions. Their simmering hostility toward each other is transformed; as Sison describes, “unexpressed love and repressed creativity find an alternative spiritual path to fulfillment; and reconciliation becomes a promise” (p. 1). As a viewer of the film, I witness the vivid humanity of these characters as they are transformed by their experience, and I cannot help but ask such questions as: Is there value in suppressing one’s desires in this life, in the hope of a great reward in the next, if it leads one to a coldness and hardness of heart? Are the so-called “pleasures of the flesh” necessarily evil, or does evil come in extremism? Can an ostensibly purely somatic experience, such as eating, have a spiritual impact? While the theology held by the community is a backdrop for the story, the theological considerations come not from their doctrine, but from witnessing their humanity. It is in their transformation that we see the reflection of the Divine (Axel, 1987).

The Objectifying Gaze

We access this vivid and resonant humanity through what is known in feminist film theory as gaze. Gaze is not simply the physical act of a human watching a screen onto which moving pictures are projected, gaze is, or can be, conveyed by the camera itself, with the director framing a given shot to actively present a gaze. Laura Mulvey’s 1975 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” introduced the concept of male gaze to explain gender-based asymmetry of power in film. Mulvey explains, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (p. 346). In Mulvey’s construction of gaze, a woman in a film serves to provoke certain actions, behaviors, or emotions in male characters, as well as in the (assumed male) audience member. She is not a fully-rounded character with agency or articulated desires, other than to pander to the male gaze. Man is the active agent and default “seer” while woman is the passive object to be acted upon and always the “seen.” In this way, the woman is reduced from a subject to an object – an object of desire, inspiration, ridicule, denigration, or whatever else the male possessor of the gaze wishes to project upon her. In the 1995 film, *Antonia’s Line*, the clearest example of this is the character of Pitte.

Pitte is the eldest of three siblings who live with their parents on a farm in the unnamed Dutch village that serves as the primary location for the film. His father is crass and abusive, and Pitte strives to live down to his example. The film makes it clear that he regards everyone and everything around him simply as objects to be acted upon. Pitte has a younger brother and a sister, Deedee, who is depicted as living with a cognitive disability. The men of the household are all loud, projective, and demanding of both physical and metaphorical space, with the women of the family made to endure their ill treatment. We are repeatedly offered glimpses of Pitte’s abuse – particularly of Deedee. He is shown verbally abusing, hitting, and kicking her, and in a particularly

vicious scene, he rapes her. Pitte's objectifying gaze harms everyone with whom he comes into contact, serving as the launching point for his behavior (Gorris, 1995).

But is male gaze the only gaze in film? Some critics claim that films such as *Magic Mike* and *Jupiter Ascending* present a "female gaze" that operates in a similarly objectifying manner toward men, but this is a false equivalence since what men in these films are shown as having is power, through various manifestations – be it strength, virility, or capability. They are framed within these films as desired and desirable because of their power and its manifestations. They are shown being active agents, even when they are providing some sort of service to a woman. Women, on the other hand, are shown as pliant, passive, and submissive, and both desired and desirable for these traits. There are other forms the gaze can take in film, though. I maintain that it can be positive; gaze need not always be objectifying.

The Theological Turn

Feminist theology posits a theology of mutual relation, which offers a path to a positive form of gaze. Carter Heyward (2010) describes a theology in which humans become like God through relation and the creativity expressed through such relation. Heyward centers this in touch, writing, "To touch is to signify relation. It is the outward and visible sign of co-creation" (p. 152). Ulrike Vollmer (2007) reimagines this in the context of film – a medium predicated upon seeing – as relation being expressed through seeing and being seen: "Vision always binds in a relationship those who see with what they see" (p. 2). She continues thus:

By thinking about God in terms of human relationships, feminist theology establishes a connection between God and human beings. Human relationships originate in, and are meant to be in the image and likeness of, God's way of relating. Belief, in this view, is not spoken as a credo but practiced as a way of relating with others that mirrors God's way of relating. [...] Human relationships are the site where people's beliefs about the divine become visible. (p. 40)

This formulation reveals fertile ground for exploring other forms of gaze in the context of film.

The Subjectifying Gaze

Seeing and being seen are existential human experiences that can be affirming or objectifying, validating or violating. In either case, it is an experience that describes a relationship that can take many different forms. Martin Buber simplifies human relating as being either I-Thou, or I-It. For Buber, "It" is a thing that I may have as an object. He contrasts this with I-Thou (offered in Kaufmann's translation as "I-You"). "You" describes a subject, not an object. By saying "I-You", an agent is acknowledging another agent. As Buber (1971) explains, "Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation" (p. 55). If a gaze can be rooted in I-It, as Mulvey describes, it can also be rooted in I-Thou. If a gaze can remove agency to render a person an object, it can also restore it, and transform an objectified person back into a subject. James Cameron's 2009 CGI extravaganza, *Avatar*, illustrates an example of how this could be. For the Na'vi, the alien species this film centers on, the traditional greeting is translated as "I see you." It is explained in the film as more than simply seeing another, meaning something closer to the idea that "the Divine within me sees the Divine within you." The character of Norm Spellman explains it as "It's not just 'I'm seeing you in front of me,' it's 'I see into you. I See you'" (Cameron, 2009). There are human cultures in the world that hold similar ideas – this is a reasonable translation for the Sanskrit word *Namaste*, for instance.

In *Antonia's Line*, many relationships are explored. Some are I-It, some are I-Thou, and some change from one to the other over time. One example of the latter is the relationship between Antonia and Farmer Bas. Shortly into the film, Antonia and her daughter, Danielle, return to the village where Antonia spent her childhood, to tend to her dying mother and take over the family home. It is not long after that Farmer Bas comes to call on Antonia. He is a widower with five sons; Antonia is also a widow, so he awkwardly suggests they should marry. Through Antonia's and Danielle's reactions, it

is clear that Farmer Bas is regarding Antonia as an object, a means to an end. He does not know her, and he does not see her; he sees a solution to a practical problem. Antonia declines his offer, but allows that he may visit, if he wishes, as there are some things around her house that she could use help with. Farmer Bas becomes a frequent guest at Antonia's table, and though she is warm, he receives nothing more from her than cordial affection. This continues for many years, as Farmer Bas learns to see Antonia as a subject rather than an object. His dour demeanor is transformed as he becomes happier and more fulfilled. It is only after he has learned to be happy with their interactions as reciprocal relating, how to see Antonia, and how to let her see him, that she extends to him the suggestion that they become lovers. Marleen Gorris, the director, gives us visual cues as to the transformation he undergoes as his wardrobe shifts from black and grey to shades of blue. We are shown a Farmer Bas who is happier, more relaxed, and more confident. Their relationship is shown as a meeting of equals coming together not out of a need, or a desire to solve the "problem" of their loneliness, but a genuine love and affection that does not seek power over the other.

Throughout the film, we see Antonia turning her subjectifying gaze on the people around her. The only person in the film that we see her turn an objectifying gaze on is Pitte. We are shown multiple scenes wherein Pitte menaces and assaults various women in the village: his sister, Deedee, as well as Danielle and her partner, Lara. Eventually, Pitte rapes Thérèse, Antonia's teenage granddaughter. Antonia goes to the village pub with a shotgun, where Pitte is celebrating. She forces him outside at gunpoint, with the villagers witnessing and not interfering. Once outside, Antonia tells Pitte that she cannot bring herself to kill him, but instead, she will curse him. As the scene unfolds, Antonia verbally strips away Pitte's bravado, and thereby his agency, reducing him to an object with her gaze and curse. He is left standing, head bowed, as she walks away. His object-ness is then confirmed by a group of villagers, whom he had previously been shown intimidating, becoming empowered by witnessing Antonia's actions, surrounding him, and beating him nearly to death. They leave him and he staggers home to seek aid. His brother, Janne, helps him to his feet and takes him to a water trough in the courtyard – ostensibly to help him clean up – whereupon Janne drowns him in the trough, leaving the corpse there. The narrator relates that rumors of what happened spread throughout the village, but no one accused anyone of wrong-doing, so glad were they to be rid of the "dearly departed." Even in this closing of Pitte's story, he is referred to as an object, something to be discarded and gladly rid of.

We see in Antonia's relationship with Farmer Bas that seeing can be a way to validate the existence and personhood of another. Through seeing, and recognizing the Other as an equal human being, the seer affirms the agency of the seen. Being seen by someone who is casting a subjectifying gaze can be not only healing, but nourishing to the psyche as two people stand in affirming relationship. Meanwhile, an objectifying gaze can be equally destructive to the psyche of the thus objectified.

Film as Interaction

While we can watch examples that illustrate the point between characters in a film, this remains entirely theory if it stays on the screen. No artifact that is witnessed by a person leaves that person unchanged, however. Art, in any form, is not simply a statement made by the artist. It is a dialogue between artist and audience. Artists' intentions rarely translate cleanly to audience experience. This is a fundamental part of art – it functions as an evocation through layers of cultural meaning and interpretation into which any given person experiencing a work has been enculturated.

Each facet of a film, pacing, humor, color, and locations, may convey something different to any given audience member, regardless of directorial intent. As such, every filmgoer spends their time in front of the screen engaging in a dialogue with the director (and the other artists whose work is part of the film). As the sounds and images unfold, the viewer is engaged on the automatic and pre-reflective emotional levels with signifiers that hold a meaning to them that may be different from the meaning the artist had in mind. The viewer negotiates their way through the film, finding meaning or not, as their experience allows. If the viewer experiences a "resonant humanity

unfolding on the silver screen” this may give rise to a rotation of their prism to grant a glimpse of humanity that transcends the separation of watcher and watched, viewer and film, and moves into the experience of I-Thou.

Through representation, we see ourselves in films. Many marginalized groups find that the more accurately they are represented in film – when they are represented at all – the more social acceptance they find in the world. Whilst Ellen DeGeneres’ landmark 1997 “coming out” episode on her eponymous television series cost Ms. DeGeneres years of her career, it catapulted acceptance of homosexuality into the public consciousness in America. Shows such as “Will and Grace” drove this even further. Similarly, for a member of a marginalized group, seeing a character who identifies as they do portrayed both positively and realistically can help them build their own sense of identity, and pride in that identity. A desire to improve representation is sometimes part of a filmmaker’s drive to make movies, when they identify within a marginalized group.

Beyond these factors, every film provides a glimpse into the mind and personhood of its creator. As an audience member, we are thus granted a gaze, not only at the characters, actors, sets, costumes, or story, but at the director, the cinematographer, the composer, and the rest of the artists involved in the production. Each of these artists are also gazing back at us. Good filmmakers know how to read, address, and even pander to an audience, even if their message is not always received exactly as they intended. While not every film provides an opening to an I-Thou experience, films in general have the capacity to do so. While not every film that does will necessarily provide the same I-Thou experience to every audience member, different films can reach different people in this way, and thereby reveal the truth of the Other and reflect the Divine (as conceived of by the audience member) through that revelation, validating and affirming the agency and personhood of the viewer in addition to the characters in the film.

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