Looking Back to Look Forward to the Female Gaze: An Analysis on the Foundational Filmmakers and their Female Protagonists.

A thesis by

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To my family, for their love and support always.

Abstract

This thesis examines theories of the female gaze through recognizing the foundational filmmakers and screenwriters who have explored varying female experiences throughout cinema history. Theories of the gaze stemmed from Laura Mulvey's fundamental 1975 essay, from which her argument posited that mainstream Hollywood cinema constructs male centred subjects who control the gaze of the narrative, whilst female characters are depicted as objects who cater to the desires of the male spectator. Since then, theorists and scholars have explored ideas of a female gaze from which female-centred narratives are explored by filmmakers. Such narratives are explored by female protagonists who control the gaze through techniques crafted by directors and/or screenwriters, reflecting key ideologies and issues that resonate with the female spectator.

This research aims to discover how theories of the female gaze have been reconstructed throughout cinema history by female directors and/or screenwriters through the representation of their female protagonists. Through conducting comparative text analysis, this thesis analysed two films within four key periods in cinema including; the French New Wave, New Hollywood Cinema, the Blockbuster Age, and contemporary Independent Cinema, to explore a range of innovative and nuanced female protagonists who have represented various female experiences on screen.

This analysis showcases the long-standing history of theories surrounding the female gaze, and identifies the socio-cultural contexts that influenced the reconstruction of the gaze by filmmakers across time and space. The results of this research highlights the different interpretations of the female gaze by key filmmakers and/or screenwriters, illustrates similarities and disparities between protagonists by filmmakers during similar periods, and reveals the importance of socio-cultural contexts that underpin various representations of female experiences throughout cinema history.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Theories surrounding the female gaze stemmed from Laura Mulvey's seminal research in her 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', from which the male gaze was coined. Mulvey posited that mainstream Hollywood cinema is built on psycho-analytical ideas of scopophilia and voyeurism through an imbalance of power dynamics between representations of male and female identities on screen. Where male characters are the controller of the gaze, women embody the objects to be looked at. It is through this male gaze that Mulvey argued that mainstream cinema caters to the heterosexual male viewer, whilst objectifying and limiting the representation of women on screen. Mulvey claimed that it is only through the rise of an "alternative cinema" can the male gaze be countered with a progressive lens of representing female characters (Mulvey, 1988, p.58). Theories of the gaze have advanced since Mulvey's foundational essay to become an extremely broad and debated topic from which scholars continue to research.

This field of research has continued to garner interest for research due to the continual reconstruction that encompass theories of the gaze including; the female spectator, the director, and/or the characters within the film. Early scholars discussed the psycho-analytical and theoretical aspects surrounding the gaze (Mulvey, 1975; Kaplan, 1983; de Lauretis, 1987; Silverman, 1988; Gamman & Marshment, 1988; Doane, 1991), ultimately creating the foundations from which future analysis on the male and female gaze is based. In discussing theories of the gaze and its impact on the female spectator, scholars have discussed theories of the gaze within contexts of audience perception (Mayne, 1993). In broadening the lens through which to view female spectatorship, scholars have also analysed the representation of minority groups in cinema and the impact that misleading and inaccurate portrayals have on female audiences (Hooks, 1992; Hollinger, 1998).

Other scholars have focused on theories of the gaze in relation to the female filmmaker, discussing foundational directors and screenwriters across various generations who have explored female experiences on screen (Beauchamp, 1998, Levitin, Plessis & Raoul, 2003; Bell & Williams, 2010; Ince, 2017; Margulies & Szaniawski, 2019). Recent research has broadened

to include the relevancy of female documentary filmmakers whose works have highlighted a range of female experiences within film (French, 2021). Research surrounding theories of the gaze have also been discussed by scholars in the context of genre forms in contemporary media through the rise of chick-flicks (Ferriss & Young, 2008), the modern indie film industry (Badley, Perkins, & Schreiber, 2016), and the revitalization of female characters in the horror genre (Creed, 2012, 2022). Overall, contemporary scholarship has broadened the analysis in emphasizing the positive representations of female experiences, highlighting a shift towards a female gaze that uplifts rather than eradicates a minority voice in cinema.

In terms of analysing female protagonists within theories of the gaze, there is limited research that explores such characters and their impact on formulating and reconstructing representations of female experiences on screen. Because of this, my focus within this research will be towards analysing the techniques that directors and screenwriters have used to craft theories of the gaze through their female protagonists. I will focus solely on a range of filmmakers whose works have been studied and analysed as following ideals that can be classified under theories of the gaze. My aim is to research cross-generational filmmakers in order to identify and analyse representations of female experiences that have been explored and adapted across time and space.

This thesis will challenge predetermined ideals of the female gaze in identifying the theory's appearance throughout various stages in cinema’s history. This research will follow a broad scope of films from pioneering filmmakers such as Agnès Varda and Barbara Loden, Hollywood screenwriters with the likes of Callie Khouri and Gillian Flynn, to leading contemporary filmmakers, Ana Lily Amirpour and Emerald Fennell. In analysing these individual filmmakers across different generations, I aim to identify the commonalities that link expressions of female experiences on screen. From this, I will also analyse the socio-cultural contexts behind the production of each film, as such circumstances have influenced varying representations of female experiences and expressions on screen.

Throughout cinema’s long standing history, the recognition of the works by female directors have often been inadequately acknowledged across international film awards. As of 2024, only

eight female directors have been nominated for best director at the Academy Awards since the award's emergence in 1929 (Davis, 2024). From this number, only three have won the award; Kathryn Bigelow for *The Hurt Locker* (2010), Chloé Zhao for *Nomadland* (2021), and Jane Campion for *The Power of the Dog* (2022). Only in 2024 did three of the ten films nominated include female directors; Justine Triet's *Anatomy of a Fall*, Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*, and Celine Song's *Past Lives* (Davis, 2024). These startling statistics illustrate the under-representation of female voices and ideas throughout cinema's history, whilst also indicating a positive shift in recognition since the beginning of the twenty-first century.

It comes as no surprise that mainstream female filmmakers with the likes of Sofia Coppola have garnered criticism, mainly by male film critics, for her directorial decisions in her female centred narratives. This is in spite of Coppola's significant filmography that has brought theories of the female gaze into contemporary Hollywood through her popular productions including; *Lost in Translation* (2003), *Marie Antoinette* (2006), and more recently, *Priscilla* (2023). As explained by Kennedy (2010), "Choosing to develop her own, feminine film form, she causes critics (and often audiences) not to know what to do with her films other than to pat Coppola on the head for having made a "pretty film" that, to quote Wesley Morris "skims with style" even if it is "mostly surface" (p.38). Coppola is one of the most successful and acclaimed female directors in Hollywood to date, however throughout her career, her female centred narratives have often been undermined by the supposed distractions of her aesthetic techniques that she employs. However, such aesthetics work to subvert a social norm in crafting nuanced depictions of female narratives and characters. Such research confirms the relevance for research into the contemporary female gaze, as mainstream representations that challenge or subvert traditional expectations remain isolated in the male dominated industry.

However, films that centre on plotlines following female protagonists have found increasing popularity as reflected in worldwide box office numbers. A study by York (2010) discussed the phenomena of women's film in the twenty-first century through the emerging popularity of chick-flicks. She stated that in 2008, films such as "*Mamma Mia!* and *Sex and the City* outperformed *The Incredible Hulk*, *Get Smart*, and *Journey to the Center of the Earth* in the worldwide revenue … changing the Hollywood moviemaking formula and affecting the types of

women's films that are produced in the future" (York, 2010, p. 4). Director and screenwriter, Greta Gerwig, has become one of the newest mainstream filmmakers who has been recognized for her creative female centred narratives. Her directorial debut, *Lady Bird* (2017), an independently produced film, gained domestic box office success, and was awarded a Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture - Musical or Comedy in 2018. Since then, she has gained mainstream success with her 2019 adaptation of *Little Women*, and most recently, *Barbie* (2023). The latter, both directed and co-written by Gerwig, amassed $1,447,038,421 in worldwide revenue, becoming the highest grossing film of the year (Box Office Mojo, 2023). These statistics suggest that films directed and/or written by women are desired by audiences globally, as such films centre on female characters and narratives that attract audiences on both domestic and international levels.

Unfortunately, mainstream directors such as Coppola and Gerwig still remain in the minority of filmmakers who are recognized for their female centred narratives. As new research by Lauzen (2024) suggests in her annual report, 'It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: Portrayals of Female Characters in the Top Grossing U.S. Films of 2023', mainstream films that centre on female characters have declined, with figures showing that; "The percentage of U.S. top grossing films featuring sole female protagonists declined from 33% (33.3%) in 2022 to 28% (28.3%) in 2023. 62% (62.0%) of films featured sole male protagonists (up from 52.2% in 2022), and 10% (9.8%) had ensembles or a combination of male and female protagonists (down from 14.4% in 2022)" (p.3). As these statistics suggest, there still remains the challenge for filmmakers to attract financial support in Hollywood to produce films written by, and for women.

Overall, both the current media landscape and contemporary scholarly research has indicated that the female gaze is more relevant and necessary than ever in today's cinematic environment. As studies have shown, if films directed by women and for women are significant consumers of cinema and garner an array of audiences, why are directors and screenwriters not given more opportunities in the industry? Have recent trends caused concern for such change? And if so, does the future look promising for more female centred narratives? From such queries, this thesis aims to look back at the history of foundational female filmmakers across four eras in Western cinema, exploring monumental female protagonists who have subverted and influenced

contemporary representations of women on screen. My research question states: how have theories of the female gaze been explored and reconstructed by female filmmakers and/or screenwriters through the representation of their female protagonists?

The main objective of this thesis is to illustrate notions of the female gaze through cross-generational filmmakers and their innovative female protagonists. In doing so, I aim to highlight that such representations across time have influenced and shaped modern depictions of the female gaze, as the phenomena's relevance across cinema has remained increasingly prevalent and popular. In order to analyse such theories, I will discuss foundational films across four key eras in Western cinema; the French New Wave (1958-1968), New Hollywood Cinema (1967-1980) to the Blockbuster Age (1975-), and contemporary independent cinema. In doing so, I will demonstrate how various filmmakers and screenwriters from each respective era have explored and built theories of the gaze through the representation of their female protagonists. I argue that such characters have challenged and reinvented notions of representing female identities and experiences on screen, highlighting important social and cultural ideologies across respective spaces in time. Ultimately, each filmmaker has crafted a female protagonist that has subverted expectations and challenged mainstream representations of female characters on screen, highlighting a range of preconceived ideologies to form positive and nuanced protagonists and narratives.

In this thesis, I plan to analyse and discuss four eras across Western cinema by comparing two films and their female protagonists within each period. In doing so, I will discuss how the female gaze has undergone constant reconstruction through the representation of various female protagonists, ultimately providing an array of works that highlight different female experiences and ideologies. I will begin by analysing French New Wave cinema and its cascading effects on American filmmakers through the emergence of the New Hollywood cinema, specifically focusing on the films *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962) directed by Agnès Varda, and *Wanda* (1970) directed by Barbara Loden. In this section, I will analyse both films and their female protagonists, Cléo and Wanda, highlighting their different means of survival, levels of agency, and views on self-identity in the background of contrasting socio-economic circumstances.

From this, I will discuss the reconstruction of the female protagonist in Hollywood blockbuster productions with *Thelma and Louise* (1991) directed by Ridley Scott and *Gone Girl* (2014) directed by David Fincher. In this section, I will focus on the patriarchal systems in America that work against women to create controversial and innovative protagonists in Thelma, Louise, and Amy, who undergo drastic circumstances to reach their journey of self-actualization. Lastly, I will discuss two contemporary independent films that have reconstructed the rape-revenge trope in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014) directed by Ana Lily Amirpour and *Promising Young Woman* (2020) directed by Emerald Fennell. In this section, I will highlight the revitalization of cinematic codes and conventions to explore contemporary issues of rape culture, female rage, and revenge against systems that protect perpetrators and individuals who take advantage of vulnerable women.

Literature Review

Foundational Theories of The Gaze.

Feminist film theorists and scholars have long been fascinated by theories of the gaze since Laura Mulvey's seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*'* (1988), from which the "male gaze" was coined (p.62). In this essay, Mulvey (1988) analysed the patriarchal systems that define and construct specific ideologies to form narratives within Hollywood cinema. Because of the male dominance in Hollywood, films and narratives have tended to depict male characters as the agent of power, whilst the female characters were being presented as passive and objectified. It is ultimately through the combination of three structures of cinema: director, character, and spectator that present a male gaze to the male spectator. For my own research, I wish to delve into how specific ideologies related to the gaze are creatively illustrated by female directors and screenwriters, specifically through the representation of female protagonists within their films. This type of research could demonstrate the contextual differences over time and space to explain how the female gaze has undergone constant reconstruction throughout cinema's history.

Karen Hollinger (2012) analysed the foundations of feminist film theory in her book *Feminist Film Studies*. She argues that within the broad analyses by theoretical scholars from the United States and Britain, there remains a large divide towards the conclusive acceptance of differing ideologies (Hollinger, 2012). She begins this analysis through discussing scholarship beginning in the 1970's, as scholars and critics analyse the frameworks within early Hollywood cinema. As stated, this approach "sees film texts as simple reflections of social reality and critiques mainstream Hollywood films for presenting … distortions of women's real lives which work to support patriarchal ideologies" (p.8). These early onset approaches, albeit a small scale of analysing theory, created the space for further discussion and nuanced analyses by future scholars.

The reconstruction of this theory is discussed within the context of cine-feminism, which brought forth a different approach to analysing Hollywood cinema by leading British scholars. Their opposing stance saw the portrayal of women on screen as a reflection of "male fantasies and

desires" that is ultimately codified by the male dominated industry of Hollywood (p.10). With the acknowledgment of the patriarchal systems that manipulate the representation of women on screen, scholars in turn highlight the importance of pioneering female filmmakers who work within this hindering structure. As Hollinger (2012) explains, scholars such as Claire Johnston "initiated the study of female filmmakers working within the Hollywood system, a direction that would have far-ranging influence on feminist criticism" (p.10). Undoubtedly, the scholarship discussed within this chapter brought to light important female filmmakers who subverted Hollywood structures in creating nuanced narratives in their respective eras.

However, these theories were countered with immense criticism, particularly when discussing Laura Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' published in 1975. Her formative coining of the male gaze is still a relevant theory in contemporary scholarship, as this created discussion surrounding the female gaze. Mulvey posited that the "spectator position offered by Hollywood cinema is masculine with female characters positioned merely as objects of male desire" (Hollinger, 2012, p.11). Debate speculated the position of female spectatorship within this framework, as it was argued that Mulvey's theory positioned the spectator as passive to this objectification.

Ultimately, Hollinger (2012) used similar frameworks to establish the timeline of scholarship between the United States and Britain. The strengths of this study come from the depth of analysis from such scholarship to establish the difference between methods, and their importance in shaping contemporary modes of the 'gaze'. However, this still leaves a gap for further exploration within the context of contemporary cinema, the relevance of the male/female gaze, and how this has brought new discussion and ideologies within these prominent frameworks.

In opposition, Ann E. Kaplan (1983) focused on the theoretical studies by Laura Mulvey to further posit the structure of the gaze within Hollywood cinema. She supports Mulvey's claims of the male gaze particularly within the context of twentieth century cinema, whereby there is no room for women to be presented as anything but passive and obligatory. This perspective ultimately limits women without any means of power or autonomy. In her analysis, she argues that the key to finding a space for women to regain a sense of agency is through examining the

original ideologies of psychoanalysis (Kaplan, 1983, p.25). In particular, this framework is used to distinguish the roles of the 'masculine' and 'feminine' characters in a film, thereby constructing narratives between two opposing structures.

This analysis is essential as it moves towards the development of the female gaze and how this may be portrayed on screen. As Kaplan (1983) explains, male Hollywood leads did not "derive their "glamour" from their looks or sexuality but from the power they were able to wield within the filmic world in which they functioned" (p.28). In reverse, women had this "glamour" reduced by their on-screen sex appeal particularly due to the constraints of the male gaze (p.28). This argument reiterates the confining structures where men control the narrative through their influence, whilst women are restricted to that of 'other'.

Conversely, under a similar lens, male characters were often confined by stereotypical character tropes in order to showcase and elicit traditional values of masculinity in order to uphold their 'powerful' status. Particularly, this was prominent during the 1980's with action films producing and instilling ideals of stoic and macho male lead heroes. As explained by Purse (2011) in her book *Contemporary Action Cinema*, such characters "displayed a pumped-up, hyper-muscular body that declared its own power and impenetrability even as the hysterical over-determination of that body revealed anxieties about its capacity to remain intact and in control" (p.97). In a similar vein, this representation ultimately hindered the construction of complex male characters, and forced unrealistic body images and characteristics that were not a reflection of the male spectator.

However, this ideal is flipped when discussing women who overtake the role of a 'masculine' lead. Kaplan (1983) argues that in gaining this sense of 'power', the female ultimately "loses her traditional feminine characteristics … of kindness, humaneness, motherliness. She is now often cold, driving, ambitious, manipulating, just like the men whose position she has usurped" (p.29). Ultimately, she argues that there is no flexibility within the 'feminine' or 'masculine' power divide and structure. This leads to the continual cycle of repression, the forfeit of agency, and lack of expression as these frameworks eliminate the ability for nuanced representation within filmic narratives. Ultimately, Kaplan (1983) adequately contextualised Mulvey's proposal and its

relevance within narrative structures, whilst also highlighting its limitations in creating new structures and interpretations.

Conversely, this provided the focus on catering towards the female spectator, where spectatorship is defined by Judith Mayne (1993) as referring to “how film-going and the consumption of movies and their myths are symbolic activities, culturally significant events” (p.1). Where Diane Waldman (1988) interprets spectatorship as “the interaction between text and spectator as the site of producing meaning” (p.80). This act of representation can be acknowledged and represented via intrinsic techniques and ideologies employed by female filmmakers, seen in feminist film theory as a move against the male spectator, one in support of the male gaze. Teresa de Lauretis (1987) highlights the key aesthetics which contend against the traditional frameworks of Hollywood to structure and formulate a female experience on screen. From experimentation and debate, the result became that “avant-garde and feminist filmmakers must take an oppositional stance against narrative “illusionism” and in favor of formalism” (p.128). Through this, female filmmakers could experiment with the embedded ideologies and structures within traditional Hollywood frameworks to create a new lens that uplifts rather than demoralises women on screen.

Within this experimentation, de Lauretis (1987) illustrated that the relationship between filmmaker and the female spectator was less focused on technological decisions through camera, editing, or composition, but rather through the representation of the female character on screen. She explains this as “it is a woman’s actions, gestures, body, and the look that define the space of our vision, the temporality and rhythms of perception, the horizon of meaning available to the spectator” (p.131). Ultimately, de Lauretis (1987) posits that the spectator resonates with the female experience through an elicit response of familial aspects showcased by the female character on screen. This is shown through the simple details that directors add to female characters, which make them relatable to female audiences, ultimately reflecting a sense of truthful identity and act of representation. Specifically focusing on Chantel Akerman’s 1976 film *Jeanne Dielman*, it is through the protagonist's procrastination of menial tasks such as peeling potatoes, her physical gestures whilst doing the dishes, or making a drink, that focuses on representing a natural and *real* character that is often ignored (De Lauretis, 1987, p.131).

However, within such contexts there remains opposing ideals of who constitutes and represents the female spectator, as de Lauretis (1987) argued towards more critical analysis on the term within scholarly research. She argued; “The idea that *a film may address the spectator as female*, rather than portray women positively or negatively, seems very important to me in the critical endeavour to characterise women’s cinema as a cinema for, not only by, women” (p.135). Interestingly, this creates a nuance within categorising female expressions, as there are many commonalities among women, but there are also a range of differences in experiences. De Lauretis (1987) further explores this idea, highlighting the importance of using these differences between women to strengthen discourse and representation on screen, rather than turning a blind eye to marginalized communities and individuals (p.137).

Overall, this analysis provides a reshaping of the collective understanding and function of the female spectator within cinema. This extensive analysis works to highlight the fundamental relationship between filmmaker and spectator, and the use of reconstructing traditional ideals in favour of expression and identification. Within my own research, I want to expand on the influence of European cinema in pioneering the female gaze through comparatively analysing a range of films to find similarities and differences between how different female experiences have been represented within the theories of the gaze.

Leading British scholars, Pam Cook and Claire Johnston (1988), analysed the filmography of Hollywood director Raoul Walsh, and his representation and characterisation of women on screen. Stemming from psychoanalytical ideologies, Cook and Johnston (1988) posited that directors with the likes of Walsh ultimately hindered and diminished the representation of female protagonists under the predominant male gaze in Hollywood. The authors discuss that in such films, the male characters' fear of castration is immediately a reflection of the fear of women as ‘threat’ and a disabler of patriarchal control and ideologies (p.27). This “lack” is ultimately denounced and hinders female protagonists to being represented on screen as ‘other’ and is only used as a vehicle of progress and triumph for the male lead (p.27). Similarly, the circulation of wealth, power, and control are subsequently stripped from women, or if female protagonists gain this circle of power, it is represented as unethical and through ‘lower’ means.

Cook and Johnston (1988) argue that as “a system, the circulation of money embodied phallic power and the right of possession, it is a system by which women are controlled” (p.28). In few of Walsh’s films, such as *The Revolt of Mamie Stover* (1956), where the female protagonist takes the place of her male counterpart as bearer of the gaze, they are still hindered and limited in their use of agency and liberty. This is inherently due to the fact that such female characters are still inherently held within the boundaries of the patriarchal landscape of the times. Ultimately, “the threat is simultaneously recognized and recuperated: the female cannot “take the place” of the male; she can only be “in his place” - his mirror image” (p.31). Because of this, female characters continued to be under-represented and misrepresented by male directors in Hollywood under the arrival of a “feminist counter-cinema” emerged on screen (p.34).

This analysis brings to light the structures that undermined and restricted the representation of women under the male gaze during the 1950s in Hollywood, specifically through the levels of control in which female characters were limited to under patriarchal systems. However, I would argue that further analysis on films by different directors during the same time period would broaden the discussion and allow for a wider scope through which to discuss the representation of female protagonists/characters under male directors in Hollywood. From this, a conclusion can contend to similar styles of representation of women on screen, or could highlight the introduction or workings of a counter-cinema as seen through autonomous female protagonists. Within my own research, I wish to discuss and analyse films in the 21st century that present nuanced and complex female characters by male directors albeit behind the screenplays of female writers. In doing so, this could build on discussion surrounding the representation of female protagonists on screen, and the differing lenses through which directors and screenwriters interpret and present such characters.

The Construction of the Female Gaze in Hollywood.

Through a meticulous overview of the key stages of feminist cinema, Lucy Fischer (2015) analyses the timeline through which critique and transformation arose within Hollywood cinema. She argues towards the introduction of feminist literature that brought about the discussion of historical Hollywood directors, with the likes of Dorothy Arzner and Ida Lupino. Stating that within the societal changes that branches from the frameworks of second-wave feminism, it was detrimental to have “a focus on female cineastes in the critical literature” (Fischer, 2015, p.227).

She explores this transformation within the abundance of female scholars who critically engaged with different periods of cinema, both domestic and international. These scholars ultimately spearheaded the discussion of female filmmakers and their narratives that explored themes of "kitchen work, to nuances of sexual experience, to the dark areas of pornography and violence" (p.227). Leading to discussion surrounding the gaze in cinema, Fischer (2015) engages with an array of authors, namely British scholars, whose works influenced the discussion of how gender within the frameworks of Hollywood cinema showcases female repression.

This timeline concludes with the relevance of female directors who broke away from traditional cinema forms to create narratives that cater to women. As Fischer (2015) explains, "this brand of film attempted to do several things: oppose the male-authored canon, forge a feminist aesthetic, and surface some of the problematic aspects of women's positions in masculine culture" (p.232). Ultimately, these films often reshaped cinema forms in relation to their male counterparts to depict stories of female experiences; an issue that had often been marginalised and under-represented.

Overall, Fischer's chapter effectively demonstrates the influential and key strategies through which a female expression had formed through structured studies by scholars throughout Europe and the United States. The limitations lie within the discussion of twenty-first century cinema; as the analysis concludes before the turn of the century in spite of the chapter's recent publication date. This stops the discussion from forming around current visions on the 'gaze' in contemporary cinema, and how female filmmakers have reshaped this mould to reflect current issues and ideals.

Further research outlines the reconstruction of the female gaze as it found its way to the US, namely with pioneering female director, Dorothy Arzner. In Donna R. Casella's (2009) article 'What Women Want: The Complex World of Dorothy Arzner and Her Cinematic Women', she explores Arzner's filmography through the limitations that she had to endure under the patriarchal structure of the Hollywood system. Despite heavily structuring her films on heterosexual marriage structures, Arzner "managed to play both sides – satisfying her studio bosses with … marriage stories that studios and press could easily spin for their own ends, while

challenging the thematic center of those narratives: women's expected social roles" (Casella, 2009, p.237).

This highlights the immediate challenges that female filmmakers in the US were facing during this period, as the only way to make a successful studio film was through reflecting socio-cultural norms in America. However, Arzner was able to consciously use structural themes of marriage and womanhood to her own advantage. She advocated change and reconstruction to create a fiction that "both affirmed societal roles for women while exploring women's struggles to meet those roles" (p.236). This inherently speaks to the frameworks by which Arzner posits the female gaze, those of a reflection on American society and its expectations of the female gender.

Casella (2009) analyses that it is through "her choice of female bonding, of a female gaze between and among women, and of costume and character" that shape and capture Arzner's filmography (p.239). However, it is essentially through the publicity that Hollywood executives placed on Arzner's films that heavily controlled how the spectator interprets her films and its underlying themes. Casella (2009) heavily references sources from newspaper articles, press releases, etc. to analyse how Hollywood constructed Arzner's popularity and her films' reception to spectators. As established, "Arzner clearly understood that her material appealed to women … However, studio publicity only recognized that community as conspiring to present women as valuing romance, court-ship, and the final product – domesticity" (Casella, 2009, p.241).

Unfortunately, this could explain the restrictive circumstances that withheld a female gaze in the US. It is not until contemporary scholars analysed and deconstructed Arzner's filmography that the undertones of the female experience are brought to light. This can be seen through Azner's films using the narrative of a female protagonist in the pursuit of marriage. Such films include; *Working Girls* (1931), *Dance, Baby, Dance* (1940) and *Merrily We Go to Hell* (1942). Ultimately, she highlights that marriage only ever benefits the male in the relationship, as many of her female characters are isolated from society and constantly abused by the very men who they thought they needed to marry in order to have a good life.

Casella's (2009) research shows a deep understanding of the societal backdrop of the early 20th century that hindered Dorothy Arzner's exploration as a female director in Hollywood. However, it is helpful in her analysis that she specifically analyses Arzner's filmography and her brilliance

in taking a women's 'role' in society to address the nuances of a female gaze. This can be demonstrated through the delicate construction and use of the sexualized female body in her films and addressing ideologies involving the pursuit of education over marriage.

However, while Casella's (2009) research builds an analysis on Arzner's many female characters throughout her filmography, there is a tendency to compare and criticise their reflection of the female experience. I believe that this limits the scope of a female gaze and its multifaceted frames, as it can ultimately lead to labelling one set idea of a female experience. From my own research, I want to further explore how the female gaze can be viewed through a multitude of expressions as they are ultimately a reflection of the societal experiences they are limited to. I will explore this through analysing a range of films across different decades in Europe and the United States, highlighting how directors from specific places across time represent systemic and ideological issues that reveal the reconstruction of the gaze.

Contemporary Theories of the Gaze.

More recent studies look back on the work of pioneering French New Wave filmmaker Agnès Varda, whose filmography consistently reflected a female gaze. As explained by Kate Ince (2024) in 'Feminist phenomenology and the film-world of Agnès Varda', Varda visualizes "feminist phenomenology in her films, in their actions, movement and relationship to space, and in the carnality of voice and vision with which Varda's own subjectivity is registered" (p.1). It is through Varda's own lived experience in France during turbulent change that she is able to distinguish and reflect a representation of the female experience through this lens.

As Mine Çimen (2024) explores in 'The Portrayal of Women in the Works of Agnes Varda', 1970's France was undergoing both challenging political ideologies and feminist movements. These social implications are visually depicted in many of Varda's films, which "centre on the issue of home and family and/or a woman's right not to pursue them… all focus on woman bodies and represented images of women in different stages of life" (p.95). This particular ideology is representative of a society that is changing and adapting to new ways of thinking, ultimately exploring new angles through which to explore theories of the female gaze.

Ince (2024) breaks down the significant advances that Varda's filmography created in terms of theories surrounding the gaze. This is particularly highlighted when referring to Varda's 1962

film *Cléo de 5 à 7*, as "despite being a personal, *auteur* film inextricable from the New Wave … [Varda] anticipates by fourteen years most of the questions and concepts Laura Mulvey would explore… in 1975" (p.11). Essentially, it is not without this early influence of significant experimental filmmakers as seen during the French New Wave, that the foundations of such a theory could not have advanced.

Similarly, Çimen (2024) identifies the ways that Varda constructs the female body on screen in relation to the spectator. Varda's regular usage of mirrors in her films rejects notions of vanity and self-appreciation, but instead is used to "establish an empathy and closeness between the female character and the spectator" (Çimen, 2024, p.99). Ultimately, Varda constructs a female gaze through female characters who see themselves and their bodies as isolated from their space in the world. Furthermore, this technique is also used to explore questions of the role of women in society. This is demonstrated as "female characters (mostly nude and staged women of different ages), directly staring at the camera and asking questions … "What does it mean to be a woman?", "Do all women want to become mothers?" (p.100). This analysis reflects on a female gaze which uses cinematic lenses to address the predominant female spectator about issues that are prominent within their own lives and socio-cultural circumstances.

From both sources of literature, there is developed research that analyses the ways in which Agnès Varda's filmography has encapsulated a gaze that reflects women during a specific space and time. Ince (2024) provides background and research into Varda's personal ideologies, reflecting how her particular feminist phenomenology is showcased in her works. This is helpful in terms of understanding Varda's stance of a female gaze, as she herself was a woman experiencing issues that are prevalent within her own culture and society. However, this research abstains from analysing the female characters in Varda's respective films, as it exclusively focuses on the director herself and her ideologies.

Çimen's (2024) deep analysis of Varda's filmography helps to build an understanding of the specific techniques that were used to subvert societal notions of the male gaze. This research was helpful in using specific examples from an array of works by Varda to demonstrate a constant theme of the female experience illustrated through different lenses. This will be useful in my own study as it can be used comparatively to how US filmmakers may have adapted these techniques to illustrate similar ideas. However, when discussing techniques that Varda used to

connect with the female spectator, there lacks further explanation as to how the audience resonated or responded to those specific scenes. I want to add to this field of study through further exploring how Varda's directorial decisions and characterisation of her female protagonists honed a reconstruction of the female gaze.

In contemporary Hollywood cinema, literature on the female gaze catered to the emergence of liberation and freedom for women. An analysis by Ann Putnam (1993) in 'The Bearer of the Gaze in Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise*' who coins the film as "a story of what happens when female protagonists reject their status as objects of visual pleasure, whose presences freezes the flow of action, to enter the flow of action themselves" (p.239). Essentially, it is through the transformation of the two female protagonists leaving the domesticated space, into a predominantly male landscape that reconstructs their image and ideologies.

Of particular importance, Putnam (2009) explores the use of mirrors in the film in a similar aspect to Çimen (2024) in 'The Portrayal of Women in the Works of Agnes Varda'. As a parallel, the motif of the mirror is used to illustrate the transformation of the gaze from being looked at, to the character being the bearer of the look. As Ann Putnam (2009) explains, after the two protagonists are on the run from the law, "cosmetic accoutrements become irrelevant, and the mirror becomes not a vehicle for narcissism … but becomes a way of *looking* itself" (p.297.) The mirror opens up a self-reflection to both female protagonists, who ultimately take control of their image and identities as they adapt to their newfound environment, free from a male gaze.

This literature was helpful in terms of identifying the reconstruction of the gaze through a contemporary American lens, which I aim to build upon in my own research. However, this literature also fails to develop a nuanced discussion on the films' overall impact and reflection of American society through the communication of themes and ideologies. From my own research, I would like to explore the ways in which films like *Thelma and Louise* use the female gaze to reflect issues that were prevalent during the date of release.

Studies on female and/or male spectators conquer an understanding of what insights audiences came away with from watching a film and whether they resonated with specific aspects and themes. In particular, a study conducted by Cooper (1999) sought out male and female spectators and their responses after viewing *Thelma and Louise*. Most notably, the topic of sexism in the film gathered an indicative response from those who identified as either male or female. Results

found that “For most women, the events in the film are a result of sexist attitudes toward women … and illustrate women’s marginalized status … But most male spectators did not make this connection between the movie’s plot and overall gender-based societal issues” (p.29).

Ultimately, this analysis illustrates that the female gaze works to reflect an everyday narrative that many women can resonate and respond to. However, on the other side, this showcases the misinterpretations of the male spectator in recognizing and empathising with systemic issues that are prevalent towards women in society. Nonetheless, it also indicates the importance of female filmmakers as their films can educate and highlight systemic issues that are going unnoticed by other individuals who are living in the same society.

I found this study helpful in building an understanding of spectators’ immediate reaction to watching the film in the same decade of its release. This could indicate particular attitudes and ideologies due to the era in which the study is set. However, the results cannot be completely trustworthy or reliable as the attendants were all from a set age range of university students. From my own research, I want to explore the importance of a female gaze in cinema, as it highlights a gap in cinema that now educates and brings to light polarized viewpoints on societal issues.

On the other side of the coin, Kevin Goddard (2000) discusses the foundations of the male and female gaze and their effects on producing ideologies and stereotypes of each gender. He discusses the influence of the female gaze on male identity and the discourse surrounding stereotypes on either gender. Goddard (2000) posits that the influence of both gazes on spectator identity is at the forefront of projecting and representing societal ideals of all gender identities (p.24). Discussing *The Full Monty* (1997), directed by Peter Cattaneo, Goddard (2000) argues that within the film, the “women voyeurs are both titillated by the unexpected revelations and excited by the reversal of the power relations and the possibilities it holds, but breaking the traditional hierarchy becomes a useful tool for the men as it does for the women” (p.25). Essentially, it is only under the female gaze that male characters are able to inhabit and express different forms of masculinity that are otherwise ignored under the male gaze.

Goddard (2000) ultimately argues that these opposite gazes are formed by “the gender roles society has shaped for each. These roles are both imposed on the individual from the outside and assumed by the collective body of society” (pp.26-27). Ultimately, it is these socially constructed

assumptions and expectations of men and women placed by social, cultural, and traditional values that uphold stereotypical representations of genders on screen. Such characters reflect anxieties of traditional masculinity and femininity, essentially restricting nuanced and newfound representations of gender that could be seen through realistic and original characters.

This article works well to articulate notions of societal expectations and implications that this may have on audience engagement and identity. I found that the discussion surrounding the representation of men and the female gaze was foundational in illustrating how the 'gaze' works to encompass a wide range of unconventional characters and brings about nuanced interpretations of gender expectations. However, this article did not delve into analysis surrounding different forms of male representation by female directors in cinema, bringing about discussion surrounding the male perspective as written/directed by a woman. In my own research, I will discuss films that showcase both traditional masculine characters and their progression with the construction of the female gaze. Particularly in the twenty-first century, male characters under the female gaze also broke these stereotypes and allowed for the discussion of a male perspective and the impacts that this form of masculinity has on such characters.

This comes as the turn of the century brings literature surrounding the contemporary crime genre in cinema. Alyce Corbett (2023) analyses the reshaping of the female gaze through this genre, explaining that "feminist crime fiction "makes guilt collective and social, and the need for change structural"" (p.251). It is through this contemporary fiction, namely in Hollywood cinema that the female gaze is again reconstructed from a predominantly male orientated genre.

It is through films such as *Promising Young Woman* (2020) that highlight this newfound aesthetic. As Corbett (2023) explains, these films "by women often shroud their dark truths in pastel, neon, glittery and 'girly' world in a way that rewrites the look of crime on female terms" (p.254). Interestingly, it is the directorial decisions through mise-en-scène, costumes, and soundtrack that create a female gaze that subverts a traditional norm into a film that illustrates that femininity can be 'girly' and lethal. This is ultimately used to bring to light contemporary issues of sexual assault, almost coercing the spectator with a 'pretty' film to tackle an often taboo topic.

I found Corbett's (2023) research incredibly helpful in viewing the female gaze through different film genres, specifically with how they differ from the traditional male gaze. This provides a historical viewpoint which I wish to explore in my own research, in order to see how a female gaze can ultimately modernize a genre within cinema itself. Where this literature analyses the thriller genre, Corbett (2023) does not explore the film adaption of *Gone Girl* (2014), a film which I found of important note as the author, Gillian Flynn, wrote the screenplay. Within my own research, I would like to add to this field through exploring such films, as they are often criticized for their 'complex' female characters.

Overall, the literature I have analysed and discussed represents the numerous frames through which the female gaze can be explored. It is ultimately through constant experimentation from avant-garde cinema across Europe, to contemporary Hollywood films that point towards a lineage of female directors and screenwriters whose desire to visualize the shared female experience built a female gaze. It is through these lenses that societal issues for women can be visualized in narratives, whilst also exploring the depths of what femininity can encompass. From the foundational literature outlined in this review, I aim to build on existing theories of the gaze to identify the reconstruction of the female gaze throughout cinema history. In doing so, I will explore a range of foundational filmmakers and analyse theories of the gaze through the representation of their female protagonists, due to the limited literature surrounding this topic.

Methodology

In this thesis, I have conducted a qualitative research approach to explore theories of the female gaze and the terms correlation with the representation of female protagonists throughout cinema history. I have chosen this approach as I found that this provided a sufficient and thorough method to explore the range of theories and patterns that pertain to my field of research. Brennen (2017), explains that in applying a qualitative approach, researchers "consider alternative notions of knowledge and they understand that reality is socially constructed. They showcase a variety of meanings and truths, and draw on a belief in and support of researcher's active role in the research process" (p.4). This approach directly corresponds with my research question, stating: how have theories of the female gaze been explored and reconstructed by female filmmakers and/or screenwriters through the representation of their female protagonists? The design of this research has been structured to identify and analyse theories of the female gaze through analysing filmmakers' approach to the characterisation of their female protagonists. It aims to discover patterns of continuity or differentiations across time to identify how such protagonists have been represented throughout significant advancements in cinema.

In identifying the appropriate films to conduct this research, I chose to broaden my search to a range of female filmmakers and/or screenwriters who have been monumental figures in shaping and showcasing representations of female experiences on screen. However, due to the large scale of films that fall within this category, I narrowed my search to focus on specific eras in cinema as female representation has undergone constant reconstruction throughout history. From this, I chose two films from different directors and/or screenwriters that I found explored similar tropes and thematic ideas within their respective eras. This created a variety of different representations of women on screen during set periods in cinema, highlighting a range of common ideologies and socio-cultural issues across time and space. Specifically, this thesis has covered a timeline from the late 1950s with the French New Wave to the 2010s-onwards with contemporary independent films.

This approach crafted my method of data analysis through applying textual analysis to answer my research question. McKee (2003) reinforces the importance of interpreting texts "in order to

try and obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them" (p.1). This notion is similarly reiterated by Brennen (2017), who explains that researchers "evaluate the many meanings found in texts and we try to understand how written, visual and spoken language helps us to create our social realities" (p.204). From these definitions, textual analysis becomes a useful methodology for researchers within film and media studies as it provides a thorough analysis on the potential meanings and socio-cultural contexts within a variety of different texts. In using textual analysis to examine the meanings behind a film text, Wildfeuer (2014) explains the significance of film as;

> "a multimodal text which is meaningfully structured by a variety of semiotic modes. It is a dynamic, but formally confined artefact in chronological, linear order. It may have intertextual references to further text types and may produce various communicative intentions according to the contexts" (p.10).

Within such definitions, textual analysis becomes a central method to investigate the various meanings and intentions that filmmakers and screenwriters have implemented in order to explore and characterize their female protagonists within the surrounding theories of the female gaze. In order to gather a reliable sample of films to analyse, I selected a total of six films across four respective eras of cinema that have explored various modes of representation through the lens of each female protagonist. I found that this method worked sufficiently to showcase a timeline of the ever changing media landscape from which filmmakers adapted various codes and conventions to explore a range of topics and narratives. Similarly, this approach was necessary to investigate the stylistic, thematic, and wider societal contexts within each film, ultimately highlighting the magnitude of female experiences that have been portrayed on screen.

I started from a significant turning point in cinematic history with the French New Wave, as filmmaker Agnès Varda built on the foundations of the New Wave to contextualise and highlight a variety of socio-cultural issues pertaining to women with *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962), altering the lens through which female experiences can be represented on screen. From this, I focused on an innovative era in the American film scene with New Hollywood cinema, as this period built on similar tropes and techniques from the French New Wave. Within this era, I focused on Barbara

Loden and her directorial debut with *Wanda* (1970), as she reconstructed preconceived ideals of the gaze in her innovative representation of a woman struggling with the socio-economic systems built into American society. Both films reflect two representations of women and their contrasting circumstances that lead to their ideas on self-identity, relationships, and security.

From this, I analysed the Blockbuster Age in Hollywood with Ridley Scott and David Fincher as two innovative filmmakers during this era. I analysed Scott's 1991 classic *Thelma & Louise*, as screenwriter Callie Khouri redefines and exposes a contemporary view on rape culture, marital and class structures, and the patriarchal systems that work against women in America. This film was foundational as a blockbuster production due to the film's topic and themes which were rarely showcased in Hollywood, with the film exploring a range of issues that are still relevant and challenged in today's society. Because of this, I chose to juxtapose my analysis with Fincher's 2014 film, *Gone Girl*, a film based on the novel written by Gillian Flynn, who also wrote the film's screenplay. I found that this film worked to reveal a contemporary lens into the topics illustrated in *Thelma & Louise*, as both films garnered critique and controversy over the depiction of feminism and violence. Similarly, both films reconstructed the representation of women on screen in crafting complex female protagonists who work towards self-identity and reinvention within patriarchal systems.

Finally, I focused on concluding my analysis with two contemporary independent films to demonstrate how the gaze has been reconstructed to reflect current discourses surrounding representations of women on screen. In this section, I focused on two contemporary filmmakers who have subverted genre traditions and conventions to explore important ideas that embody female experiences to audiences. I analysed Ana Lily Amirpour's 2014 film *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, as Amirpour subverts both socio-cultural ideologies as an Iranian-American, whilst revitalising the tropes of the horror and western genre. In doing so, Amirpour explores female revenge and refuge against vicious men through her female protagonist, highlighting contemporary notions of identity and safety within damaging societal structures. In comparison, I found Emerald Fennell's 2020 rape-revenge film *Promising Young Woman* an appropriate film to discuss the current climate of the #MeToo movement, in which Fennell similarly uses cinematic codes and conventions to heighten and subvert audience expectations. In doing so, both

Amirpour and Fennell craft nuanced female protagonists who take up the role as protector of vulnerable women through their vengeful acts against dangerous men. Ultimately, I found that both films were important in reconstructing the gaze in the twenty-first century which works to explore contemporary issues and popular discourses. In particular, both films were important in showcasing two female experiences that highlight the consequences of violence against women and the aftermath of calculated means of revenge and justice.

In conducting this research, there remains the risk of potential limitations within my methodology that could restrict my findings and overall results. Firstly, the number of films I had selected to analyse is relatively small in number; having only conducted analyses on six films. Because of this, my research may not provide an accurate representation of the gaze and may lead to an inaccurate answer to my research question. In order to minimise the potential impact of this result, I selected films that focused on protagonists that represented different socio-cultural backgrounds and displayed varying levels of influence within their respective narratives. Similarly, each film that I selected had cultural impacts on exploring the boundaries through which female experiences can be showcased on screen. This was demonstrated through the recognition each film gained within their contribution to cinema, as well as the contrasting responses by critics and audiences alike. From this, I found that the six films I had selected provided a positive representation of the gaze across time and space, ultimately revealing the lens through which filmmakers and/or screenwriters have explored a magnitude of ideas and issues through their female protagonists.

Another potential limitation lies within the design of my research, specifically in conducting textual and comparative analysis to answer my research question. This type of analysis can lead to a subjective interpretation of ideas and images that are illustrated within each selected text, ultimately creating false and/or biased readings of the text. This could potentially lead to inaccurate and misleading analyses as researchers may interpret the text within a different context or understanding. In order to minimise this potential impact, I conducted thorough research into the wider contexts behind each text that I had selected. I provided examples of the filmmakers, screenwriters, and/or actors' intentions and perspectives that went into making their respective films. From this, although I conducted an argument based on my own understanding

and reading of specific scenes within each text, I provided background knowledge of the intended meanings and background contexts of each text to ensure an accurate and unbiased analysis. Similarly, I also discussed and analysed previous research by scholars within my field in order to demonstrate a series of similar statements of analysis and argument in the texts that I selected.

In order to minimise potential ethical implications within this research, I have aimed to provide accurate and informative analyses on varying representations of female experiences on screen. In my research, I have aimed to explore theories of the gaze as a phenomena in cinema both past and present. This phenomena encompasses a wide range of identities and voices, and therefore it is essential to provide informative and accurate portrayals of social and cultural issues on screen to remove forms of misrepresentation. From this, it is also important to acknowledge and provide inclusive research to fully encompass communities represented in the contemporary media landscape in relation to theories surrounding the female gaze.

Because theories of the gaze encapsulate a wide variety of differing experiences and expressions, my research has aimed to encompass a range of voices without marginalising or simplifying these experiences. This research covers different cultural and social experiences from a range of filmmakers to provide a broad landscape of the history and timeline of voices across the cinematic landscape. This has allowed for a thorough enquiry into this field of research, creating room for the discussion of different perspectives and interpretations surrounding theories of the gaze.

Overall, each chapter in this thesis has adopted comparative text analysis to identify and discuss a timeline of foundational filmmakers and screenwriters who have crafted nuanced and innovative films that showcase varying female experiences and ideologies. Specifically, each section highlights the diverse forms of representation through different female protagonists, whilst illustrating how socio-cultural and cinematic codes and conventions worked to enhance and reinvent how female expressions and experiences can be explored on screen. Whilst this thesis has encountered potential limitations and ethical considerations, the research conducted has minimised this risk in providing accurate and reliable analyses and results. Ultimately, this thesis has provided an inquiry into the ever changing cinematic environment, highlighting key

foundational filmmakers who have broadened the lens through different female protagonists who have represented crucial discourses and ideologies to wider audiences on screen.

Chapter One: The Journey towards Self Awareness and Security in *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962) and *Wanda* (1970).

In this chapter, I will briefly discuss the emergence of the French New Wave, the key aesthetic and cultural impact that this period had on domestic and international cinema, and the movement's influence on the formulation of New Hollywood Cinema. In doing so, I will analyse and compare two films that I believe encompass and reconstruct the female gaze through the representation of the female protagonists within each respective era. From the French New Wave, I will analyse *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962) directed by Agnès Varda, and *Wanda* (1970) directed by Barbara Loden, within New Hollywood Cinema. I will discuss how both Varda and Loden were monumental figures in building a counter-cinema that crafted nuanced narratives based on women's experiences. Where both films follow their respective female protagonists, it is ultimately through their contrasting socio-economic circumstances that led to an array of scholarly discourse surrounding newfound representations of women on screen.

The New Wave and Agnès Varda.

Where European cinema had to undergo drastic changes to revitalise cinema in the aftermath of World War II, this allowed French filmmakers to enhance their creativity and experimentation to explore newfound aesthetics and narratives. Emerging in the late 1950s, the French New Wave was identified through similar tropes and techniques that connected many directors, including; naturalistic mise en scène, jump cut sequences, long takes, etc. As Morrey (2019) explains, screenplays were also often side-lined during filming, as a "carefully elaborated screenplay tends to work against the openness to the real and sense of spontaneity sought by most New Wave directors" (p.5). This is similarly demonstrated with the rise of New Hollywood Cinema, described by King (2002) as a shift in the landscape of American cinema impacted by industrial, aesthetic/style, and political changes.

Agnès Varda was a monumental figure in the Left Bank scene of the French New Wave; with her filmography often being labelled as experimental and followed documentary-styled modes as she was heavily influenced by her background in photography. As an auteur, she heavily focused on

the female figure across her filmography; from short to feature length films. It is directly because of Varda's personal stylistic choices and aesthetic during the New Wave that allowed for the reconstruction of a female gaze on screen. This idea has been particularly evident throughout her filmography, as Varda was "committed to exploring the feminist dialectic of the woman seeing/the woman seen" (Flitterman-Lewis, 1996, p.218). This dialectic can be found within the range of female protagonists that worked to highlight socio-cultural issues within France such as self-identity and bodily autonomy. These include, but are not limited to, her films *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962), *One Sings, The Other Doesn't* (1977), and *Vegabond* (1985).

Seeing the success that the French New Wave brought in increasing France's national entertainment industry, Hollywood studios sought to employ these filmmakers to reap their own financial benefits. This ploy ultimately saw New Wave filmmakers as "an extension of its strategy to incorporate the aesthetic lifestyle choices of the American counterculture" (Li, 2022, p.58). However, where many of the male New Wave directors were approached by Hollywood studios, Varda did not gain the same initial success. Where the New Wave thrived in producing films that countered the traditional cinema in exploring nuanced topics, gender dynamics, social issues, etc. Hollywood was not focused on pursuing similar interests. As Li (2022) explains, "the kind of political awareness and social engagement captured in Varda's works was a bad fit for Hollywood's more superficial interest in profiting off of the chic and rebellious French culture" (p.58). However, it was directly because of this superficial aesthetic that caused many American filmmakers to turn to independent cinema, where narratives were without creative borders or constraints.

Mulvey, Mainstream Hollywood Cinema, and the Hays Code.

In her seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Mulvey (1988) identifies the necessity of an "alternative cinema" that juxtaposes the gaze from the traditional Hollywood narratives that tend to cater to a male gaze (p.58). As explained, this counter-cinema "provides a space for a cinema to be born which is radical in both a political and an aesthetic sense and challenges the basic assumptions of the mainstream film" (pp.58-59). This cinema could be seen with the emergence of New Hollywood Cinema, which saw the reconstruction of strong

formalist techniques and boundaries in order to produce an array of innovative films that completely changed the trajectory of the bounds of filmmakers' creative abilities.

This cinema was born out of the declining Hollywood system during the 1930s-50s with the enforcement of the Hays Code. This cinema saw the repression of a female gaze, as many female screenwriters working within the Hollywood system had to adhere their narrative's to structured guidelines set out in the Code. Screenwriters such as Anita Loos and Katryn Scola have been credited with a number of films that showcased complex female characters that ultimately "challenged traditional moral and political views held by a vocal, powerful minority" (Black, 1994, p.56). However, due to the religious underpinnings of the Code, namely based on conservative Catholic ideologies, images that pertained to women's bodies and/or expressions were heavily censored or removed from mainstream narratives. Similarly, socio-cultural ideologies that indicated "moral issues such as divorce, birth control, abortion and premarital sex" were also viewed as inappropriate topics to impose on American audiences (Black, 1994, p.55). Unfortunately, where such ideologies were not a reflection of the values upheld by audiences, the power structures that supported such entities ensured the removal of a female gaze within mainstream Hollywood cinema.

New Hollywood Cinema and Barbara Loden.

The New Hollywood Cinema that emerged in the 1960s-70s saw the influence of European avant-garde experimentation employed and transformed by American filmmakers. Similar to the French New Wave, the subsequent films "mark this point in Post-Hollywood, when American film began to take up in earnest the burden and question of America as a society: its self-consciousness and self-division" (Cardullo, 2008, p.381). Similar techniques showed experimentation through long shot sequences, shifts in narrative structures, and naturalistic, improvisational acting. Following un-conventional narrative structures and plot devices, this led to an array of innovative and newfound narratives. The filmmakers that emerged throughout this era were concerned with leading the "desire to impose upon society a truthfulness - of event, emotion, and action - which society had until this point masked from itself … through fantasy and illusion, wishful thinking, compensatory fictions" (p.381). Stemming from a disapproval of

narratives released within Hollywood, the filmmakers that emerged during the period of New Hollywood Cinema saw the need to evoke audiences with an alternate cinema that does not shy away from unconventional modes of expression.

Barbara Loden arrived onto this scene at the end of the New American Cinema era with the release of her 1970 film, *Wanda*. Loden's auteur style can be described under Tzioumakis's (2017) labelling of auteur's that emerged during this era; as a filmmaker who "remains faithful to their artistic vision and demonstrates a certain aversion to mainstream cinema, which is dismissed as pure entertainment or escapism" (p.164). With her directorial debut of *Wanda* (1970), Loden is credited as also writing the screenplay and starring as the film's female protagonist. Akin to the New Hollywood Cinema style, Loden heavily focused on improvisation throughout the filming process within the foundations of the screenplay set in place.

Murphy (2019) outlined the reasoning behind this process, explaining that due to the "films low-budget, her use of non-professional actors, and the DIY approach she was forced to adopt during production" led to unorthodox means of filmmaking (p.80). Due to lack of financial backing by studio investments, independent American filmmakers with the likes of Loden used the tools and prior knowledge they had acquired to create their own films. Whilst such films lacked the wide theatrical releases that would've garnered distribution of their works, it was ultimately due to the innovative and experimental aspect of such films that eventually garnered critical and scholarly attention. This was evident through *Wanda*'s critical success upon the film's release, with Loden receiving the Pasinetti Award for Best Foreign Film at the 31st Venice International Film Festival.

Ultimately, both the French New Wave and New Hollywood cinema were marked as significant movements in cinema history for filmmakers to explore creative freedoms and expressions within their filmography. In both periods, female filmmakers were able to create narratives that could challenge notions of the gaze in laying the foundations for exploring nuanced female characters, ideologies, and narratives that ultimately subverted previous understandings of female representation on screen.

A Comparative Analysis of *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962) and *Wanda* (1970).

In *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962), the film is split into thirteen chapters as Varda described the film as; "a form of *cinéma verité*. I think people are defined by their surroundings. In this sense, *Cléo de 5 à 7* is a documentary on a woman. I wanted to make a transparent film, whose form would be clear; objective time gives the spectator some distance on the events" (Uytterhoeven, 2014, p.16). The film opens with the introduction of a troubled singer, Cléo (Corinne Marchand), who seeks out a psychic to predict her future through the practice of tarot after discovering she may have a terminal illness. She is easily influenced by the results of the reading, with extreme close-up shots showcasing her character's tearful reaction upon discovering her supposed fate. This is immediately countered in the next scene as she stares at herself in the mirror, a zoom-in shot examining the details of her youthful appearance. Comforting herself, she says; "Hold on, pretty butterfly. Ugliness is a kind of death. As long as I'm beautiful, I'm more alive than others" (00:06:31-00:06:39). Despite her impending health results, Cléo is entirely focused on her outward appearance, particularly based on carrying this perception that others have on her. She consciously identifies her purpose and opinion of herself based on her attractive appearance, whilst subconsciously surrounding herself with individuals who solely benefit from her beauty and supposed naiveté.

Cléo is constantly viewed as a recognisable other in her societal appearance, from which she is stared at and observed as she goes about her daily life. Her style is sophisticated and fashionable, wearing a polka-dot dress, up do hairstyle, heels, and a purse, she easily catches the eyes of onlookers and passers-by as she walks down the street. This becomes immediately apparent as she exits the building from the opening scene, with a mid-tracking shot following her as she casually walks to meet her assistant at a cafe down the street. On this journey, she receives comments from men at their stores and on the street, and stirs conversation between both women and men. This only reiterates and enforces her perceived ideology and impression of herself, as the foundations of the attention she attracts from others is solely based on her outward persona and apparent charisma.

This is a brilliant juxtaposition with *Wanda* (1970) as the film immediately opens with a panning shot of a coal factory, orientating the audiences' gaze to a single house situated on the land. From here, a series of mid-shots briefly introduces the various individuals who live in this home, buzzing with the noise of the trucks pouring coal until the sudden interruption of a baby's cries. A panning shot orientates the audience's attention to Wanda (Barbara Loden), introduced as a sleeping figure on a couch, hidden from plain view under a white sheet. Her discontent with her current living circumstances are showcased by a close-up shot of her face as she looks outside the window to see herself enclosed by a coal factory. Immediately, Wanda is presented as a nomadic and unconventional protagonist who finds herself in dire circumstances as she undergoes a divorce and custody settlement with her husband. Her lack of maternal instinct towards a baby's screams works to showcase Wanda's atypical nature within her current martial circumstances and her sense of belonging in her community.

Similar to *Cléo from 5 to 7*, this scene cuts to a zoom-in shot that establishes the impoverished environment that Wanda is constrained to. This is followed by a long tracking shot of Wanda, dressed in an all-white attire as she stumbles through the uneven terrain, standing out against the rugged and dark background of rural Pennsylvania. Arguably, this correlates with Wanda's feelings of isolation in her community, like her nomadic choices and unwillingness to uphold her status as wife and mother, she represents women who are viewed as other; an outcast that does not blend in with the structure of her community. Through these similar techniques, both Loden and Varda build a sympathetic structure which reflects onto the audience in showcasing their female protagonists as misunderstood and distressed individuals. As Rogers (2023) explains, Loden "uses genre subversively to indict specific American values through a woman's perspective" (p.168). This is particularly present through the influence of *cinéma verité* in Loden's stylistic choices in filming *Wanda*. This is reflected through the handheld camera and frequent long takes that work to create an authentic and undisturbed narrative that follows Wanda; a female protagonist who lacks direction and security within an American system that fails to acknowledge those who cannot fit into these capitalist structures.

Both films capture the difference between economic circumstances for women, especially in regards to the designation of a woman's status based on how well she presents herself to the

world. Where Cléo has the means to afford a lavish lifestyle due to her initial success as a singer, she uses this income to boost her appearance, whilst also using shopping as a means to distract herself from her impending results from the hospital. This is reflected in the scene where Cléo and Angèle walk past a hat shop, with both women having adverse reactions to the displays in the window. Where a close up shot cuts between Angèle and the display of hats that she gazes at, she immediately appears disinterested and adverse to the fashion. Whereas, Cléo openly admires the selection and brightens upon seeing an item that she desires, but does not necessarily need. This is made apparent by Angèle who considers Cléo's impulsive spending as she chooses a winter hat despite the warm weather, stating; "Fur? At this time of year?" raising her eyebrows at her decision (00:12:38-00:12:40). Where Cléo views her money as a casual commodity to be spent at leisure, she similarly orientates herself as ignorant to the socio-economic circumstances of the current landscape that she occupies. However, it is only because Cléo is surrounded by a circle of individuals who endorse her beauty and lifestyle that she uses her money as a means of escape and comfort.

Comparatively, Wanda is left with only the clothes on her back as she aimlessly walks through a mall after finalising her divorce and forfeiting sole custody of her children to their father. A tracking shot follows her as she admires a display of clothes inside a store, walking past a series of mannequins donning expensive and stylish dresses. A close-up shot cuts between a blonde-haired mannequin and Wanda; a reminder of a life she desires but also one that can never be her own. Under the impoverished circumstances that she is confined in, Standing outside the entrance of the store, a panning shot highlights her hesitance as she focuses her attention on the blonde mannequin. However, she quickly dismisses the thought and continues her aimless journey. Where Cléo is oblivious to the luxury of impulsive spending, Wanda understands the value of money as a necessity to form independence and an exchange for everyday essentials.

This idea becomes immediately apparent in the beginning of the film as Wanda trudges through the factory's terrain to ask a familiar worker, Tony, for spare cash to catch the bus to her court hearing. She asks; "Could you loan me a little bit of money?" He replies; "Boy, I don't have too much money… But if I had more, I would give you more." She answers; "I just need a little bit" (00:09:02-00:09:13). The scene cuts to Wanda waiting on the side of the road for the bus, which

immediately transitions to a hand-held wide shot of her sitting at the back, capturing her consuming loneliness and isolation. This is particularly juxtaposed with the introduction of her husband, whose access to a car allows him the luxury to get where he needs to go without the reliance on public transportation. This further illustrates the contrasting positions of women in society whose scarcity of financial support and income creates a dependence on others to conjure cash under hindered economic circumstances. Upon the release of *Wanda* (1970), Loden's film was criticised for her depiction of a female protagonist who did not reflect the underpinnings of the second-wave feminism movement. This is explained by Gorfinkel (2019), who states:

> "The acute figuration of refusal in obstinacy and passivity that Loden's *Wanda* calls forth has remained a difficult kernel for feminist criticism and film theory to digest, especially a critical point rooted in affirmative representations, positive messages, and a politics of the cinematic apparatus that aims to eradicate social inequalities" (p.28).

Loden's artistic vision that she attempted to portray in *Wanda* was often dismissed and misunderstood upon its initial theatrical release. The film tackles what Rogers (2021) describes as "the ongoing toil of millions of forgotten Americans who are struggling to attain 'dignity', but who can never escape the place and class into which they are born" (p.32). This idea is particularly represented through her female protagonist, Wanda, who struggles to find autonomy, self-worth, and purpose, following the men she constantly finds herself attached to. Arguably, Loden challenged the representation of women on screen in her characterization of Wanda, as she showcased a female protagonist who does not immediately present a 'positive' or uplifting image of a female figure. In doing so, Loden demonstrated that female experiences are not one of the same and instead encompasses those who may not have the means to participate in popular discourse. Ultimately, because such representations were rare in American cinema during this time, critical and scholarly discourse initially dismissed the foundations and complexities of her character in contempt of Loden's rhetoric and nuance.

However, this discussion shifted with the rise of second-wave feminist scholarship, where instead, it can be analysed that *Wanda* "dares to suggest that for many women, feminism (of a specific variety) may be a luxury they cannot afford" (p.41). This is particularly relevant to

theoretical studies of the female gaze; as female experiences and expressions are not linear, but expose and work to highlight different levels of systemic and economic challenges for women in society. Essentially, it is because the film "does not leave the viewer with any sense of comfort or relief" that the spectator has to acknowledge the ongoing "pain of this woman's existence" (p.33). This arguably demonstrates the strong need for films like *Wanda*, as filmmakers such as Loden were not afraid to navigate issues that spectators would not find comfort in, but instead become educated and attuned to the daily struggles of marginalised individuals and communities. Ultimately, it was particularly Loden's attempt to create this 'counter-cinema' that deviates from traditional cinema tropes and techniques to illustrate reality and systemic issues that are prevalent in the United States.

In comparison, Cléo's oblivion is further explored to expose her naiveté in the wake of exposure to women who represent different societal experiences from her own. This is specifically apparent within the context of her class status; Cléo being a middle-class individual in which Varda deconstructs and exposes this positionality to reflect on the systemic differences between individuals in France during this period. This is particularly demonstrated in a scene where Cléo and Angèle are picked up by a female cab driver, a profession seemingly prominent for men due to issues of safety and prejudice. With the radio on in the background, one of Cléo's songs starts to play. She begins by making a fuss, begging for it to be turned off. She shouts at the driver; "Stop it! Please stop!" (00:18:09-00:18:14). A close-up shot captures her unamused eye roll and obvious discomfort. When she turns off the music, the cab driver begins a conversation with the two women. Angèle remarks on the prospect of the job; stating a "Tough job for a woman," to which she replies: "Sometimes a bit dangerous too. But I like it" (00:18:47-00:18:51). The driver remarks on an incident that occurred while she was driving a group of young men at night; "I don't like trouble. I was attacked last winter… a deserted spot, and pitch-black. But I didn't let them get away" (00:19:40-00:19:59). Cléo replies; "Weren't you scared to death?" to which the driver responds; "I don't scare easily" (00:20:07-00:20:10).

It is from this point that Cléo realises her ignorance and blatant naiveté that relinquishes her self-centred behaviour when the driver asks to put the radio on, responding; "Sure, it's your taxi" (00:20:20-00:20:23). This scene is powerful in not only recognising the changing

socio-economic environment in France during the 1960's, specifically as women worked in male dominated industries and reserved their right to work as a necessary means of income. It is also important as it is through this interaction that Cléo begins to understand a world outside her own through the lived experiences of other women who live within the same space as her, albeit under different positions.

This contrast of positional reflection also becomes apparent in *Wanda* when the arrival of Mr. Dennis becomes a contrasting gaze within the narrative. Wanda, in comparison to Cléo, is a working-class individual who relies on varying means of income that leave her vulnerable and exposed in the face of changing economic and political forces. These factors ultimately lead to a lack of protection and power imbalance in the face of dangerous individuals. This is demonstrated in a scene where Wanda has her wallet stolen when she falls asleep in a movie theatre, resulting in her walking into a bar in need of a bathroom in the middle of the night. A hand-held shot follows Wanda as she stares at herself in a broken mirror, helpless without anywhere to go. This scene cuts to Mr. Dennis, a wanted bank robber, who is in the process of robbing the bar. His aggravated and nervous demeanour is heightened by the hand-held shot that showcases his physical discomfort as Wanda distantly washes her face in the bathroom sink. At her lowest point, Wanda, completely unaware of the irony of her current situation, tells Mr. Dennis; "You know what happened to me? Somebody stole all my money" whilst he stands behind the bar filling his pockets with cash from the till (00:28:59-00:29:02). Instead of assessing her current surroundings, Wanda exists solely in her own world, focused on fixing her appearance by combing her hair. She remains unaware of Mr. Dennis' bewildered stares and unnerved gestures. However, her placid and airy impression is soon replaced as she becomes entangled with Mr. Dennis, ultimately revealing her street smarts and independent nature.

Lastly, where both films explore complex relationships with male characters, both romantic and platonic, each illustrates a societal ideology to demean women through their supposed lack of intelligence. This is either reflected by their maintenance of their physical attributes or their threatening independent nature that does not correspond with the social norm. In *Cléo from 5 to 7*, Cléo is constantly viewed under the male gaze, either by onlookers on the streets or by her fellow musicians who comment on her physical beauty as her only redeeming commodity.

During one scene, Cléo practices rehearsing her songs with two male musicians, Bob and Maurice, despite her ill mood. Frightened by the reminders of death and loss after rehearsing a new song, Cléo abruptly ends the rehearsal. A mid-tracking shot follows Cléo after her outburst, being mocked by Bob, who counters that she is having "another caprice" (00:40:57–00:40:58). To which she responds; "You make me capricious. Either I'm an idiot or a china doll… You unnerve me to exploit me" (00:41:02-00:41:18). In this scene, she is labelled as a "spoilt child" upon the realisation that she is surrounded by both men and women who do not see her as a human being, but rather a product to be sold. Ultimately, her frightened thoughts of her looming test results are dismissed and presented as an immature tantrum, largely because Angèle told her earlier; "Don't mention your illness. Men hate it" (00:26:04-00:26:07). It is solely because Cléo has had her identity stripped down under the male gaze by labels of physical beauty and a spoilt nature, that she is never able to see another side of herself until the discovery of a potential life threatening illness.

However, in *Wanda*, similar obstructions based on male perception see Wanda viewed as a product of male exploitation, despite her intelligence in understanding the depths of these structural challenges whilst subtly showcasing her own strengths within this hindering system. This becomes apparent in the beginning of the film when Wanda constantly seeks out men as an unstable source of security, particularly as a woman on her own without a permanent roof over her head. However, this dichotomy is virtually reversed when Wanda finds herself entangled with Mr. Dennis, demonstrating her street smarts and non-conformist nature against a man who exhibits low morality in a challenging socio-economic society. This is specifically demonstrated through Mr. Dennis' dependence on Wanda as he continues to hide from the law due to his numerous criminal offences.

His threatened position against Wanda is reflected in her ability as a woman to survive on her own and live by her own means becomes more apparent as he constantly questions her intelligence. Arguably, this anger is used as a mask to disguise his own inability to accept the impoverished system that works to hinder women and men. This idea is illustrated in a scene between Wanda and Mr. Dennis as they take a break from travelling, from which he begins belittling her due to her lack of care towards her outward appearance. Explaining that she doesn't

have the means to afford such luxuries, a close-up shot focuses on Wanda as she states the truth without a hint of malice or anger; “I don’t have anything, never did have anything, never will have anything” (00:57:33-00:57:37). Calling her out, Mr. Dennis labels her as stupid, explaining; “You don’t want anything, you won’t have anything. You don’t have anything, you're nothing. May as well be dead. You’re not even a citizen of the United States” (00:57:45-00:57:54). The scene cuts between the two characters, close-up shots contrasting their differing postures and expressions. A brief pause focuses on Wanda, who casually sips on a beer, retorting; “I guess I’m dead then” with a final zoom-in shot that captures her expressionless face (00:58:02-00:58:04).

This scene brilliantly captures Wanda’s understanding of her place in society and how she is hindered by socio-economic structures that fail to support women. This scene in particular also works to contradict her lack of supposed stupidity through demonstrating her immense strength and resilience as a woman on her own, relying on her consistent effort to make an honest living in spite of the challenges she continues to face. This is particularly important as this contrasts with Mr. Dennis’ inability to grasp the effects of this hindering structure, ultimately finding his own solution to a lack of income through stealing from others and abusing a system that heavily works to support predominantly masculine identities. Arguably, it is simply because of his inability to adapt to a changing climate that he chooses to label and degrade her as a lesser person.

Overall, Varda has brilliantly taken the female protagonist of Cléo as a product of a male gaze in a setting that heavily reinforces beauty as paramount, her decision to flip this narrative allows Cléo to become the bearer of the female gaze upon discovering a sense of self-awareness in creating her own fate and identity. Through this, Cléo discovers the differing experiences of women within the shared community in Paris, heightening her empathy and a space for reflection on her own morality. Comparatively, Loden crafts a complicated and misunderstood female protagonist in Wanda whose transformation never comes into fruition, albeit demonstrating an innate sense of independence and solitude under an impoverished system that works against women focused on basic survival and security.

Chapter Two: Who's Crazy Now? The Multifaceted Female Psyche in *Thelma & Louise* (1991) and *Gone Girl* (2014).

By the end of the 20th century, Hollywood narratives accelerated with the release of successful blockbuster films that saw the focus on sci-fi, drama, and thriller film genres. This was demonstrated through films with the likes of *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) directed by James Cameron, *Forrest Gump* (1994) directed by Robert Zemeckis, and *Basic Instinct* (1992) directed by Paul Verhoeven. In this chapter, I will discuss two Hollywood filmmakers, Ridley Scott and David Fincher, who were both successful directors during this era. Interestingly, both filmmakers followed the specified genre tropes in order to challenge preconceived topics and issues that had not yet been subjected in a Hollywood blockbuster. In doing so, these filmmakers worked alongside female screenwriters; Callie Khouri and Gillian Flynn respectively, to discuss and highlight controversial topics that ultimately reconstructed the roles of masculine and feminine identities within Hollywood cinema.

Ridley Scott released a series of successful sci-fi films throughout the 80s with *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982), with the former being heralded and critiqued for the films representation of its female protagonist, Ripley, who "achieves the sort of heroic status such genre films traditionally reserve for men" (Torry, 1994, p.343). Similarly, David Fincher, who is best known for his crime and psychological thrillers including *Se7en* (1995), and *Fight Club* (1999), often uses this genre as a "pervasive strategy of obfuscation, ambiguity, and symbolic playfulness that perpetuates white masculinity's privilege as an ideological formation and subject position" (King, 2009, p.367). Having established their trademark in Hollywood through these successful films, I will discuss how both these directors reconstructed the female gaze upon the release of the blockbuster films *Thelma & Louise* (1991) directed by Ridley Scott, and *Gone Girl* (2014) directed by David Fincher. These films were foundational in constructing a contemporary lens which saw complex female protagonists challenge and seek retribution against societal expectations placed on themselves and on other women. Arguably, it is precisely because of the female screenwriters behind each film; Callie Khouri and Gillian Flynn respectively, that crafted and redefined the complex structures of women in their respective space and time, resulting in highly controversial and nuanced female protagonists.

Thelma & Louise centres on female identity and liberation under the conformance of social expectations and norms that hinder two women's freedoms. This is particularly demonstrated through the nature of Thelma (Geena Davis) and Louise's (Susan Sarandon) opposing social status; Thelma is a young house-wife who caters to her husband, Darryl's (Christopher McDonald) needs while he works and brings in a stable income. In comparison, Louise works as a waitress at a local diner and is involved in a complicated and non-committal relationship with her boyfriend, Jimmy. However, it is through their decision to embark on a spontaneous weekend trip that their personalities and romantic relationships begin to unravel and ultimately shift their outlook on life. The structure of Thelma and Darryl's relationship is immediately presented in the beginning of the film, where the introduction of Thelma's character is shown through a wide shot of her clearing up the table after breakfast. The muffled sound of the phone ringing is heard as a hand-held camera follows Thelma's hurried movements across the room. She shouts to announce she will answer the phone, introducing her brazen and unabashed personality.

Discussing the trip with Louise on the phone, Thelma reveals that she has yet to ask Darryl for permission to go. A similar hand-held shot follows Louise across the diner as she speaks to Thelma, replying; "Is he your husband or your father? It's just two day's for God's sake. Don't be a child. Tell him you're going with me. Tell him I'm having a nervous breakdown" (00:03:01-00:03:17). Thelma's hesitant behaviour and Louise's help of an excuse for Thelma to go out for the weekend becomes immediately apparent with the introduction of Darryl's character in the same scene. A wide shot of the hallway shows Darryl walking into the shot upon which his disgruntled nature immediately changes the mood of the scene, slamming his briefcase on top of the counter in annoyance at Thelma calling out for him. Pointing a finger at her, he says; "Goddamn it, Thelma. Don't holler like that" (00:03:37-00:03:42). Suddenly, Thelma's expressive and flamboyant demeanor instantly retreats upon her husband's arrival, ensuring that he does not get aggravated by her.

However, this dynamic switches upon the challenging circumstances that Thelma and Louise find themselves in during their spontaneous road trip, as the narrative of two friends who wish to escape from their mundane lives suddenly become two suspected criminals in a manslaughter case. This is specifically explored when Darryl initially appears completely unbeknownst to

Thelma's disappearance, from which she begins to view their relationship in a new light. Driving down the highway, Louise explains to Thelma that Darryl has been calling her boyfriend, Jimmy (Michael Masden), "mad as a hornet" when he realized that Thelma wasn't at home (00:34:27-00:34:29). A close-up shot focuses on Thelma as she remarks to Louise; "You know I called the asshole at four o'clock in the morning. He wasn't even home. I don't know what he has to be mad about. I'm the one who should be mad" (00:34:39-00:34:48). Later on, Thelma tries to cover up their whereabouts when attempting to call Darryl in order to downplay the severity of their current situation.

Darryl immediately attempts to assert his authority by questioning and interrogating her; "Have you lost your mind? Is that it? Now I leave for work and you take complete leave of your senses?" (00:38:17-00:38:23). This scene works to develop Darryl's character, as the scene opens with a zoom shot that highlights an array of baseball trophies on open display within their home, however this shot then immediately pans to him sipping on a beer as he watches a football chair from the comfort of his lounger. Ultimately, this could signal towards Darryl's discontent and anger as his life goals may not have come to fruition. This stark contrast works to highlight Darryl's previous ambitions and achievements that due to undisclosed reasons, eventually led to his career as a carpet salesman. Instead, his resentment and dissatisfaction is used to punish and control Thelma, who in comparison has become an autonomous individual surrounded by rural terrain, mountains, and fields, whilst Darryl is bound to their home. Responding to Darryl's questioning, Thelma responds; "Darryl, calm down, please. Don't get so mad, I can explain, okay?" (00:38:24-00:38:28) She is immediately interrupted by Darryl's focus on the football game on the television. This disrespect changes Thelma's attitude to the situation, suddenly irritated by his demeaning and uncaring nature.

An extreme-close up shot illustrates Thelma's change in perspective, highlighting her pent up impatience. She retorts; "You are my husband, not my father… Go fuck yourself" (00:39:04-00:39:30). Ultimately, this shift in dynamic is only made available through Thelma's newfound freedom and experiences that allow her to view her marriage in a different light. Arguably, in the beginning of the film, because her life was centred on her home and duties as a wife, she was never able to see how toxic and unattainable it is to maintain her husband's

happiness. Whereas, from the second half of the film, it is because Thelma has stepped outside of the boundaries of usual environment and into unforeseeable circumstances that she comes to realise her level of control over her own life, and decides to speak out against his controlling demands.

This ideal is similarly demonstrated in *Gone Girl* (2014), albeit to illustrate structural changes in American society surrounding financial recessions and representations of toxic masculinity wherein women become the main breadwinner of a household. With the release of *Gone Girl* in 2014, Flynn's characterisation of Amy (Rosamund Pike) as a manipulative and complex female protagonist led to debate surrounding her blurred feminist agenda. This is specifically discussed by Maury (2020) who describes Amy Dunne as a character who "can be read as a critique of the effects of postfeminist ideology because Amy is turned into a deranged product of postfeminism" (p.107). This idea is illustrated through Amy's constant conflict within herself to be the 'cool girl' despite knowing this caters to the male gaze. This ideal leads to her sudden downfall as she cannot live up to this perceived expectation that she has placed on herself; ultimately realising that this false persona only benefits her husband, Nick.

This is specifically illustrated in the film through her deteriorating relationship with Nick (Ben Affleck), when they leave New York City after both Nick and Amy lose their jobs during an economic crisis. Nick's mother also becomes ill, forcing them to pack up their lives and move to Nick's hometown in Missouri. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Fincher explained the significance of casting Affleck in this role, stating; "I think he sort of tempers how people react to him; he's cautious about that. He doesn't want to make anybody feel bad. It's fun to watch somebody who is so willing to sublimate themselves in order to make everything better – or more lubricated – and put him in a situation where he's got to speak for himself" (Pierce, 2014). This is particularly important within the context of the narrative, as Nick's character is presented as charming and charismatic; one that audiences are familiar with in Affleck's previous films (*Armageddon, Pearl Harbour, The Town*). However, this only works to later introduce the real Nick, who like Amy, presents himself in construction with the ideals of the American masculine.

In the film, a transition shot works to juxtapose the building tension within their marriage, beginning with mutual support of one another during unforeseeable difficulties, to the subtle shifts in the masculine and feminine roles within Amy and Nick's marriage. This is brilliantly set up with an establishing shot of Nick with his feet up on the couch, Chinese takeaways and beer on the table, with a video game console in his hands. Amy enters the scene from the background, with the camera panning to follow her movements across the room to capture its entire contents (00:33:30-00:33:38). Nick becomes immediately defensive and agitated upon Amy questioning his spending habits whilst she cleans up his leftover food. Antagonising her, he says; "God forbid I buy a videogame without getting your permission… You don't trust me. You don't trust my judgement. You certainly don't trust my intention… Well that's the basic tenet of a prenup, isn't it?" Amy responds; "Why are you throwing that in my face again? Nick, I don't get it. I don't get why you're daring me to be someone that I don't want to be. The nagging shrew. The controlling bitch. I'm not that person. I'm your wife" (00:33:53-00:34:17). This scene in particular is detrimental to understanding Amy's complicated character and works to piece together the reasoning behind her destructive actions against Nick later in the film.

Where Amy is set up as a devoted and content wife, she is ultimately a representation of the toxic and challenging dichotomy that women are characterised within as wives. Because of this, she becomes the embodiment of a relaxed, fun, and easy-going wife specifically because she knows this is exactly what Nick wants in a partner. However, she uses the stereotypes of women who are the opposite of this persona as a "nagging shrew" or "controlling bitch" to symbolise how these women are often perceived and labelled by their husbands. In using these terms, Nick immediately changes his attitude towards Amy, apologising for his behaviour as a close-up shot cuts between the two characters, Nick closes his eyes and places his hands up to cover his face (00:34:12-00:34:18). As Maury (2020) explains, Amy Dunne "embodies the complex, simultaneous, and conflicting presence of feminist and anti-feminist discourses", which is made present through her distorted view of women in relationships, ultimately degrading women who pester their husbands (p.98).

However, it is exactly because of Amy's inability to uphold her own warped standards of being the perfect woman that causes her to incite drastic measures when Nick can no longer maintain

his charming persona that she fell in love with. She begins to see that this twisted ‘cool girl’ persona does not equate to Nick being a perfect man, especially when she discovers his infidelity with a younger woman. This scene also articulates the complicated masculine structures that lead to Nick’s undoing, as he becomes the symbol of men who have to rely on their wives for financial support during an economic crisis. Because of this, he feels emasculated by Amy’s position as the main bread earner and reacts negatively against her when she questions his spending habits despite him not financially contributing.

This idea is explored in more detail when it is revealed that Amy plans on framing Nick for her murder because she discovered that he has been indulging in an affair with a younger woman who follows the ‘cool girl’ model. This phenomenon is explained by Amy half way into the film when it is revealed to the audience that Amy is in fact not dead, but is instead seeking vengeance against her cheating husband. In a public bathroom, she ditches her polished appearance by cutting and dyeing her hair as her voice-over narrative describes her internal thoughts and decisive reasoning behind her disappearance. She explains the ‘cool girl’ image, stating; “Men always use that, don’t they? As their defining compliment … Cool girl is hot. Cool girl is game. Cool girl is fun. Cool girl never gets angry at her man” (01:10:29-01:10:40). Describing the ‘cool girl’, a close-up shot focuses on Amy as she smokes a cigarette whilst adorning bland clothing and a plastic hair cap. This cuts directly to a wide angle shot which exposes her sitting on the toilet; instantly coughing out the smoke from the cigarette. Through these shots, Fincher creates a sense of irony and humour to the scene by exposing the reality of the ‘cool girl’ image as a facade. This scene also indicates the turning point for Amy as she attempts to remove all evidence of her old self in order to make herself unrecognizable, ultimately revealing her true identity.

This idea can also be illustrated in *Thelma & Louise* through the lewd behaviours that men express to attract the attention of women, without recognizing or acknowledging that women find these actions inappropriate and make them feel uncomfortable. This male stereotype is illustrated through a singular character in the form of a truck driver that the women regularly overtake on the road. A panning shot illustrates Louise’s restricted vision as she attempts to overtake the driver on the highway, with a wide angle shot introducing the driver as he waves her

forward to signal that it is free to overtake. Moved by this kind gesture, Thelma says; “Isn’t that nice? Truck drivers are always so nice. Best drivers on the road” only for him to make lewd gestures whilst honking at them as they pass (01:14:16-01:14:20). Disgusted, Louise calls him a “pig” and explains to Thelma that “they think we like it” (01:14:42-01:14:49).

When the pair are travelling at night, they recognize the same truck driver and prepare to overtake him again. Louise tells Thelma to “just ignore him” as a close-up shot focuses on the pair as the driver continues to make inappropriate gestures and words at them, highlighting their irritated and uncomfortable expressions as they overtake him (1:29-33-1:29-35). This scene in particular reiterates the notion that if women acknowledge and react to this behaviour, it will only encourage these men to continue with more obscene language. This is explored between the dynamic between the two women, as a close up shot focuses on the pair after Louise overtakes the driver. She turns to look over at Thelma who defends herself by saying “I ignored him” as the driver continues to honk at them (01:29:51-01:29:52).

Finally, by the end of the film the two women have relinquished their fears of incarceration and punishment as they continue to evade law enforcement. Through this, the pair discover their sense of freedom and identity, ultimately becoming unapologetic individuals. In doing so, they surrender their acceptance of inappropriate behaviour, opting to react rather than ignore it. As explained by Griggers (1992), “This pleasure is imminently dangerous, because the general political economy, which is a masculine political economy, will be devalued by it” (p.135). This idea is specifically illustrated when the duo once again come across the truck driver, only this time they come up with a plan to teach him a lesson on what happens when you choose to speak inappropriately to women. Thinking he is going to get lucky with the pair, he pulls over to meet them. A long shot works to set up the scene as the women sit in the foreground of the shot, their backs to the camera highlighting Thelma’s gun sticking out the back of her jeans. Approaching in the centre of the shot, the man appears small and immature compared to the women who sit powerful in their upright and controlled stance. Louise immediately starts questioning the man on his behaviour, asking him “Where did you get off behaving like that with women you don’t even know? Huh?” (01:46:50-01:46:56) Refusing to apologise, Louise points her gun towards him; “You say you’re sorry, or I’m going to make you fucking sorry” (01:47:40-01:47:53).

Yelling obscenities at the pair, an extreme close-up shot cuts to Louise as she aims the gun at his tyres, popping all of them. Thelma joins suit, and the truck eventually explodes, surprising everyone.

Upon *Thelma & Louise*'s cinematic release in 1991, the film garnered an array of attention and criticism towards screenwriter Callie Khouri, in allegedly promoting unnecessary violence and male-bashing agendas under the disguise of female empowerment. In turn, Khouri responded to such criticism, stating;

> "Kiss my ass. I was raised in this society. Let them get their deal worked out about the way women are treated in films before they start hassling me about the way men are treated. There's a whole genre of films known as 'exploitation' based on the degradation of women and a whole bunch of redneck critics extolling its virtues, and until there's a subgenre of women doing the same thing to men in numbers too numerous to count, as is the case with exploitation film, then just shut the fuck up" (Stocken, 2000, p.17).

Arguably, what such criticism failed to acknowledge is that Khouri worked to create a film that relates to the experiences of women who have witnessed or experienced harassment in their everyday life. However, it can be argued that this criticism similarly stems from Khouri's reconstruction of the conventional formulas within the road movie; a genre that traditionally caters to the masculine. In doing so, Khouri reverses this structure to highlight contemporary issues that pertain to women in American society. This is reiterated by Roberts (1997), who explains that "the female protagonists take to the road not to escape socially coded notions of the feminine, but rather to flee patriarchy and its effects on their lives. The trend, therefore, works to bring concerns associated with women and feminism into public discourse" (p.63). This idea is particularly demonstrated throughout the scenes with the truck driver harassing the two female protagonists, from which Khouri explained that; "There is not one single gesture in that script that I didn't witness with my own eyes" (Stocken, 2000, p.20). From this, it can be seen as unfair judgement to renounce the film's supposed male-bashing agenda in favour of dismissing the real experiences of women in a modern society.

In *Thelma & Louise* and *Gone Girl*, both Thelma and Amy are perceived and labelled as varying levels of disturbed by their husbands when their choices become inconvenient for them. In *Thelma & Louise*, this is illustrated in a scene between Darryl and the head detective, Hal (Harvey Keitel), who is investigating the pair's disappearance. A series of close-up shots cut between the two men as Hal questions Darryl on his relationship with Thelma. He asks; "Now I don't want to get too personal, but do you have a good relationship with your wife?" Immediately defensive, Darryl responds with an accusatory point of a finger; "I love Thelma" (01:11:57-01:12:00). Hal raises his eyebrows, surprised by Darryl's reaction. He changes his tone, responding; "I don't intend anything by that, Sir. Just a question I have to ask. Are you close with her?" (01:12:02-01:12-07). The camera cuts to a close-up shot of Darryl's face, with his eyes shifting to the side as he quickly answers the question; "Yeah, I guess. I mean, I'm about as close as I can be to a nutcase like that" (01:12:08-01:12:14). Scoffing at his own joke, Hal laughs at the expense of Darryl, as another officer explains that if Thelma attempts to ring him, he should act like "you really miss her. Women love that shit" (1:08:54-1:09:17). This scene is important in establishing the humorous dichotomy between the roles of men and women within the film, ultimately illustrating men's inadequacy to understand how women work. This humour adds to the overall narrative as it is used in contrast to the distressing situation that the women find themselves in.

Where Darryl labels Thelma as a "nutcase", Thelma embraces being seen as crazy, and instead uses it to make light of their situation. This is brilliantly juxtaposed in a scene where she and Louise are pulled over by a police officer for speeding. What immediately appears as a troubling scenario for the duo quickly becomes comedic and light-hearted with Thelma's quick thinking solution of pulling a gun on the officer before either of them can be arrested. This is illustrated through a close-up shot of Louise and the police officer in the car, with Thelma's face entering the shot in the background, ultimately bringing the audience's attention to her. Smiling politely, she points the gun at the officer. A panning shot follows the officer as he exits the vehicle, highlighting his frightened posture in contrast with Thelma's calm and controlled one as she continues to point the gun at him. Thelma respectfully explains to the officer; "Now I swear, three days ago neither one of us would have ever pulled a stunt like that. But if you was to ever meet my husband, you'd understand why" (01:39:26-01:39:33). The camera cuts to a close-up

shot of Louise's reaction as she nods in agreement, equally shocked by Thelma's newfound confidence. A wide shot captures the humorous behaviours of all three characters; the officer in the forefront of the shot crying, Thelma standing in charge in the middle pointing a gun at him, and Louise in the background of the shot, equally bewildered and amazed by Thelma's attitude. Pleading that he has a wife and children, Thelma retorts; "You be sweet to them, especially your wife. My husband wasn't sweet to me, look how I turned out" (01:40:26-01:40:31).

These two scenes also work to reiterate the spatial difference in which men and women inhabit in the film, constantly shifting audiences expectations with comedic undertones. This argument is further posited by Sturken (2000) who sees this discourse as an important aspect of the film, as this "establishes not only the ways in which physical space is gendered, and then recoded, but also how space, knowledge and human nature are understood quite differently by men and women" (pp.44-45). This is particularly established in the beginning of the film, as Darryl is the sole figure who has access to private transport and the open road (as Thelma's car is stuck in the garage). However, the two friends' road trip opens up access for Thelma and Louise to experience different perspectives and opportunities, forever changing the way they value themselves and their life. However, with this comes a switch in power dynamics, as Darryl now becomes the housewife figure and cannot deal with feeling confined to a single space. Because of this, he ultimately blames Thelma for this sudden entrapment, confiding in his male counterparts to disguise this insecurity in being placed in such a limited position.

This idea is similarly illustrated in *Gone Girl* when Amy returns home to Nick, revealing herself as a toxic by-product of contemporary gendered and marital expectations. As Osborne (2017) explains, Amy "has usurped the patriarchal role of the head of her household, and, because of her vindictive response to infidelity, is deemed a "psycho bitch" by the men in her life" (p.10). This idea is highlighted in a scene between Nick and defence attorney, Tanner Bolt (Tyler Perry), as Nick expresses his fears of feeling unsafe around her. When introduced to the film, Bolt is described as the "patron saint to wife killers everywhere" (00:51:49-00:51:52). This indicative casting of Perry by Fincher similarly works to subvert audience expectations of toxic masculine structures, as Perry is well-known for creating and starring in the 2005 film *Diary of a Black Woman*. The film centres on a young woman, Helen, whose attorney husband has been unfaithful

to their marriage, and elicits abusive behaviour on his wife. Perry stars as the central character, Madea, the grandmother of Helen who offers security and support during her divorce. In a 2012 interview with *NPR* (National Public Radio), Perry explains that the female influences in his childhood inspired the character Madea;

> "My mother ... took me everywhere with her, which gave me a tremendous amount of sensitivity to the things women go through … [In my writing] I'm speaking from the little boy who's at her apron, looking up at the world and seeing all that I'm seeing these women go through" (Gross, 2012).

Contrasting over the shoulder shots cut between the two men as Tanner tells Nick; "You are not at risk anymore" to which Nick responds "I'm the definition of at risk" (02:17:00-02:17:02). Tanner analyses the positives of Nick's situation through the financial gain which he has gained from Amy's manipulative tactics; "You've got a book deal, a lifetime movie, you've franchised The Bar, you may want to thank her. Just don't piss her off" (02:17:03-02:17:08). He leans over to slap Nick on the knee, cutting to a close-up shot of Nick's disappointed face, stunned by his inability to catch Amy out in her own game.

This scene solidifies the misunderstanding that both men have towards the complexities of Amy's psyche, with Tanner completely undermining her unstable and manipulative personality in favour of cracking a joke with another man against the light-hearted consequences of upsetting a wife. Similar to *Thelma & Louise*, in *Gone Girl* both men and women exist in different spaces both physically and figuratively, resulting in an inability to understand or effectively communicate their personal desires or expectations of each other. This is further highlighted in one of the final scenes of the film where Nick reacts in a violent outburst when Amy reveals that she is pregnant. A close-up shot highlights Nick pushing Amy into a wall, with the sound of her head upon impact filling the silence of the scene. Unfazed, Amy exposes Nick's own weaknesses to him. "I'm the cunt you married. The only time you liked yourself was when you were trying to be someone this cunt might like… You think you'd be happy with a nice Midwestern girl? No way baby, I'm it … I've killed for you, who else can say that?" (2:21:33-2:21:52). To this admission, Nick ultimately rejects and denies Amy's understanding of their relationship,

responding; “Look, you’re *delusional*. I mean, you’re *insane*. Why would you even want this? Yes, I loved you, and then all we did was resent each other, and try to control each other, and cause each other pain” (2:21:59-2:22:09). Close-up shots cut between the two characters, highlighting the contrast between their differing emotional states. Where Nick appears emotive, a contrasting close-up shot shows Amy as completely apathetic and void of feeling. Quick to reply, she tells Nick; “That’s marriage. Now I’m getting ready” (02:22:10-02:22:16).

Where Amy has reached a sense of self-actualization in her identity as a woman and partner, she believes that Nick too has revealed himself as a flawed and imperfect individual in the process. Amy ultimately exposes Nick to the reality that her ‘cool girl’ persona has only worked to make him feel more masculine and empowered. As Osborne (2017) explains, Amy “employs revenge to force her husband to perform the role of a doting spouse as she has likewise been expected via her gender role” (p.24). Through the declaration of her pregnancy, Amy reveals to Nick that she expects him to uphold his responsibility as the husband that he ultimately chose to be; as this is what would be expected of her if the roles were reversed. This idea is explored during Amy’s previous monologue scene, from which she explains how their marriage began deteriorating; “Nick got lazy. He became someone I did not agree to marry … You think I’d let him destroy me and end up happier than ever? No fucking way. He doesn’t get to win” (01:11:57-01:12:26). While it is undeniable that Amy’s psychotic actions lead her to be seen as a complicated and challenging female protagonist, it can also be argued that she is a by-product of the socio-cultural environment which formed her conflicting ideologies. This is further reiterated by Lota (2016), who explains that it is through the authors “intelligence and insight into the way contemporary American society constructs gender expectations [that] allows Flynn to critique the system that produces those expectations, rather than simply present Amy as an essentialized vision of female evil” (Lota, 2016, p.163).

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Flynn similarly defends her feminist agenda with her characterization of Amy, explaining:

> “To me, that puts a very, very small window on what feminism is … Is it really only girl power, and you-go-girl, and empower yourself, and be the best you can be? For me, it's also the ability

> to have women who are bad characters … the one thing that really frustrates me is this idea that women are innately good, innately nurturing. In literature, they can be dismissably bad – trampy, vampy, bitchy types – but there's still a big pushback against the idea that women can be just pragmatically evil, bad and selfish ... I don't write psycho bitches. The psycho bitch is just crazy – she has no motive, and so she's a dismissible person because of her psycho-bitchiness" (Burkeman, 2013).

Arguably, Flynn widens the lens through which to characterise female protagonists and characters as multifaceted and imperfect people, similar to Khouri in writing *Thelma & Louise*. This is particularly apparent with Amy being viewed as a personification of the damaging impacts of the standardised ideals of being the perfect woman. Because of this, she can be viewed as both dangerous and intelligent, cunning yet able to also garner sympathy from audiences. Similarly, whilst Thelma and Louise exist within the context of a different time and space, they too, reject existing within patriarchal systems. This is demonstrated in the final scene of the film, where the pair choose to drive off a cliff rather than surrender to a law enforcement and society that works against their safety and security. Whilst in *Gone Girl*, Amy returns to this society by destroying the old version of herself in favour of the multifaceted woman that she reveals herself to be.

Overall, both films demonstrate the shift in mainstream narratives that have provided an opening to discuss and highlight the contradictory and complicated modes of female representation in contemporary cinema. In doing so, as Man (1993) has highlighted, these forms of representation ultimately "frames new fantasies for spectator appropriation, those that link the feminist desires within the film's audience to those of its female protagonists" (p.39). Where *Thelma & Louise* deconstructs contemporary ideologies of rape culture, marital structures, and the notions of gendered spaces, *Gone Girl* similarly highlights the contradictory expectations placed on men and women in maintaining an ideal image that is impossible to uphold. Essentially, it is through female protagonists such as Thelma, Louise, and Amy, that there is room for more nuanced female characters to be portrayed on screen. This is important as such complex characters reveal the underside of societies failing to protect women under the law as seen in *Thelma & Louise*, and in the extremes of instilling unrealistic expectations on women in *Gone Girl*.

Chapter Three: The New Age of Calculated Vengeance in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014) and *Promising Young Woman* (2020).

In this chapter, I will explore two contemporary independent rape-revenge films that have been widely discussed and critiqued for their reconstruction of the subgenre that has been explored throughout cinema's long standing history. The two films that I will be discussing are *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014) directed by Ana Lily Amirpour and *Promising Young Woman* (2020) directed by Emerald Fennell. I will discuss how both directors have crafted and redefined the genre through the representation of their contemporary female protagonists. Within both films, Amirpour and Fennell similarly position their female protagonists as the outsider in America in order to expose the toxic masculine structures within their respective narratives. In doing so, both films use these protagonists to challenge notions of violence towards women in society, explore how these systemic issues allow such acts to remain unquestioned, and how the perpetuation of rape culture in society leads to a range of relevant discourses between all gender identities.

In *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014), the film introduces The Girl (Sheila Vand) as a mysterious outsider figure who observes the behaviours of the everyday people in the fictional Bad City. She first appears as a cloaked, hidden figure who disappears before her identity can be exposed. Soon after, she is revealed to be a young woman whose chador ensues a hidden, cloaked silhouette. One night, she walks through the city and passes by Saeed (Dominic Rains); a known drug dealer in the town who is intrigued by her mysterious demeanour and invites her back to his apartment. A wide shot captures the contrast between both characters, as Saeed sits on his couch snorting cocaine and smoking cigarettes, The Girl stands in the foreground, silently observing both his behaviour and her surroundings. As The Girl moves around the space, an extreme close-up shot cuts between the two characters as Saeed approaches her from behind and places his hand on her shoulder. Touching her face, The Girl opens her mouth, revealing her fangs and ultimately exposing her vampire status. Placing his finger in her mouth, she bites his

finger clean off. Extreme close-up shots cut between both characters, The Girl reveals a smirk as Saeed screams and cries in pain at this sudden switch in power dynamics. Following him as he withers away from her across the floor, she uses his own severed finger against him. Tracing his finger across his mouth, she places his finger in his mouth and bites into his neck, ultimately killing him.

It is from this scene that she is revealed as the mysterious figure from the beginning of the film who observed Saeed and Atti (Mozhan Navabi); a local prostitute, in an empty parking lot. The Girl cleverly re-enacts the scene she witnessed, using Saeed's aggressive behaviour towards women against him for his timely death. This is explained by Creed (2022), who states that "Amirpour parodies his extreme phallicity. He thinks he is the hunter in his lair, but he will soon become the prey" (p.98). Where Saeed sees himself as a powerful figure who remains unchallenged in Bad City, The Girl brilliantly uses her feminine appearance to lure him into her trap. She is purposeful and calculated in her attack, a vampire figure who teaches her victims a lesson before taking what she wants from them. Ultimately, Saeed represents the oppressive and dangerous men in society that degrade and abuse those who he believes are lesser than him. In this sense, it is revealed that The Girl occupies Bad City as a powerful figure who uses her vampire status to protect those in marginalised positions against men who seek to take advantage of them.

Amirpour, an Iranian-American filmmaker, subverts genre traditions in using cross-cultural ideals to create a western horror film with *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*. Following what Carol J. Clover coined the 'Final Girl' in her essay 'Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film', Amirpour uses this idea within a contemporary lens. The 'Final Girl' is described by Clover (2002) as "the first character to sense something amiss and the only one to deduce from the accumulating evidence the patterns and extent of the threat; the only one, in other words, whose perspective approaches our own privileged understanding of the situation" (p.79). This is specifically evident in the characterization of The Girl; the only character who can see the extent of the abuse and oppression that women face in Bad City. She is also the only character, albeit because of her vampire status, who is able to challenge antagonistic characters and come out on top.

The directorial decisions made by Amirpour also reiterate the categorization of The Girl within the 'Final Girl' trope. As Clover (2002) explains, the use of point-of-view shots from the perspective of the Final Girl allows the audience to see "with her, we become if not the killer of the killer then the agent of his expulsion from the narrative vision" (p.79). This is specifically illustrated in the beginning of the film, as a point-of-view shot is used to introduce The Girl, as the audience we see through her eyes as she watches Saeed and Atti in the carpark. In this sense, the audience becomes attuned to the thoughts and intentions of The Girl, ultimately seeing this fictional world through her point of view. Because of this, any violence that is committed by her becomes encouraged rather than renounced, simply because the audience has seen through her eyes how Saeed abuses vulnerable women.

This idea is similarly represented in *Promising Young Woman* (2020) through the female protagonist Cassie (Carey Mulligan); a grief-stricken woman who seeks to avenge her best friend's death. She portrays this through calculated acts against men who take advantage of vulnerable women, and those who protect such individuals from formal consequences and prosecution. In the film, Cassie plans a series of revenge plots against the people who were involved in the circumstances surrounding Nina's assault whilst at university. Meeting for lunch with a former classmate, Madison (Alison Brie), Cassie discusses the events that occurred after Nina's assault. Remembering that Nina confided in Madison after the incident happened, Madison rebukes that she did not believe Nina and accused her of "crying wolf" (00:38:43-00:38:44). She states; "I'm not the only one who didn't believe it. If you have a reputation for sleeping around, then maybe people aren't going to believe you when you say something's happened" (00:38:31-00:38:39). A close-up shot cuts to Cassie's face, revealing her disbelief at the blatant statement that Madison made towards a past friend and victim. Madison soon becomes visibly intoxicated, regularly drinking glasses of wine throughout the conversation. She continues; "Look, when you get that drunk, things happen. Don't get blackout drunk all the time and then expect people to be on your side when you have sex with someone you don't want to" (00:38:51-00:39:00). A close-up shot focuses on Madison, highlighting her drunken state as she picks up her glass to take another sip of wine.

Cassie's revenge ensues after the confirmation of Madison's stance towards Nina's assault. Wanting to teach her a lesson, she leaves Madison in her drunken state at the restaurant, as a wide panning shot reveals a man who Cassie hired to take Madison back to a hotel room. The scene closes with the insinuation of Madison's own words being used against her. Cutting to the next day, a low-angle shot highlights Cassie's phone ringing face down on a glass table, revealing Madison's name on the caller ID. A zooming shot focuses on Cassie's expressions as she listens to the voice messages left by Madison, highlighting her stoic and nonchalant demeanour. This is in stark comparison to Madison's nervous and stuttering voice on the phone when she explains her situation to Cassie; "Cassie, sorry, please call me back. I'm freaking out a little. I woke up in one of the hotel rooms. I think something might have happened. I-I don't know" (00:40:49-00:40:58). Similar to The Girl, Cassie's series of revenge plots work as retribution against individuals who perpetuate damaging acts against vulnerable women. However, in Cassie's circumstance her revenge is used to highlight the systematic scale of responsibility involved in assault cases that work to protect perpetrators.

As Creed (2022) explains, "although the female protagonist seeks revenge at a personal level, directors depict her goal, not as revenge, but as *revolt*, that is, revolt against the universal and entrenched practices of rape culture which is a crucial power structure of the patriarchal symbolic order" (p.51). This is specifically illustrated in *Promising Young Woman*, as Cassie purposefully targets all levels of systemic abuse that are responsible for her friend's assault. As the conversation between Cassie and Madison at the restaurant suggests, Madison is the representation of women whose toxic ideological beliefs towards promiscuity and alcohol consumption results in a blame culture that is used against young women. Because of this ideology, in the result of rape, a young woman's credibility and support is completely eradicated. In this way, Cassie targets her revenge to show Madison what it would feel like to be put in this exact situation herself. Because Madison woke up completely unaware of her surroundings, it isn't until Cassie explains to her that "He just put you in bed. Kept an eye on you to make sure you were okay" that she could reclaim her sense of security (1:13:28-1:13:32). From this experience, Madison gets a taste of her own medicine and realises how frightening this exact situation would be for anyone, ultimately changing her stance surrounding blame culture on women.

Within contemporary socio-political ideals in the United States, it can be argued that Fennell and Mulligan brilliantly and unapologetically expose American patriarchal hierarchies, policies, and individuals who perpetuate a culture that protects men of high status from legal punishment in the face of committing sexual violence against women. As the title of the film itself suggests, Cassie and her best friend, Nina, were both 'promising young women' who were studying to become doctors. However, after Nina was assaulted at a party, both women drop out of their course as a result of the physical and psychological impact that the assault had on them. In the film, it is revealed that Nina took her own life, leaving Cassie in a constant state of grief and anger. This trauma is particularly revealed when she hears the name of Nina's assailant, Al Munroe, brought up in conversation. Upon discovering that he is soon to be married and currently working as a doctor, her behaviour immediately changes as he conjures up memories of the past. A zooming shot focuses on Cassie's distraught face as she listens to Ryan, a reconnected classmate, as he jokes about his friend. Ryan jokes; "Classic Al, you know, landing on his feet" as he explains that Al moved back from London to start a life with his fiancé (00:32:43-00:32:45). This remark holds further connotations to explore how privileged men eventually recover from allegations of assault, and bounce back with successful personal lives and abundant careers. Upon hearing this news, Cassie sarcastically remarks; "good for him" (00:33:07-00:33:08).

This scene reflects connotations with the #MeToo movement which became popularised online in 2017 but stemmed from Tarana Burke back in 2006. As explained by Sielke (2024), the movement "exposes the fearful silence of accessories and the close-knit complexity of the social and economic hierarchies that frame our personal and professional relations and that create protected safe spaces for sexual violation" (p.213). The movement comes with the exposure of successful, wealthy men with the likes of Harvey Weinstein, Donald Trump, and R. Kelly whose power and status allowed their violations against women to remain unchallenged. Gloria Allred, an American women's rights lawyer, worked to represent women who sought legal action against these men. Speaking in an 2017 interview with Robin Page West, she states "I believe that there are consequences that need to be faced by perpetrators of injustice, those who are sexual predators engaged in rape … What can be done in my view is impose serious enough

consequences on them so that others will be discouraged from inflicting similar injustices on women" (p.38).

This becomes an increasingly relevant and nuanced topic that is reflected through films such as *Promising Young Woman*, with contemporary systemic issues inspired by the #MeToo movement being brought to the forefront to expose and challenge ideologies that had not been as brutally honest and/or successfully executed in Hollywood previously. This is particularly interesting as it is British director and screenwriter, Fennell, and leading actress, Mulligan, who step up to the challenge to highlight contemporary issues of rape culture in the United States. Arguably, this film became a box-office success specifically because the topics that this film tackles needed an outsider lens that could produce an unbiased and honest lens during what Cobb and Horeck (2018) coined the "post-Weinstein" era that exposed Hollywood's complicity to the abuse of power by high-profile men (p.489). Similarly, Amirpour tackles similar themes in creating the fictional Bad City; a representation of cross-cultural boundaries between American and Iranian society. As explained by Edwards (2017), the film "challenges not simply the centre or the fixed concept of the Western nation-state, but also the margins or the constant fluctuating borderlands of the diaspora paradigm by creating a private world outside these dichotomous communally defined spaces" (p.19). Through this, Amirpour is able to successfully execute this blend of cultural representation specifically because of her own lived experiences. This is explored in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* through the cross-cultural politics that similarly renounce and abuse vulnerable individuals.

In *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, The Girl acts as a mythical, all-powerful figure who uses her vampire status to frighten and deter boys and men from hurting women. Arguably, it is only through her status as being other in her vampire form that she is able to successfully intervene in the lives of those in Bad City, as the fear and lingering threats she elicits are the only successful deterrent that evokes change. This is particularly illustrated in a scene between The Girl and a young boy who similarly wanders the streets at night, warning and threatening him of the consequences of any misbehaviour he may commit. A tracking shot follows the young boy as he walks down an alleyway late at night, ominous music illustrating that The Girl is nearby. A mid-shot introduces The Girl in the background of the scene, as the young boy turns his head,

feeling the presence of someone following him. A close-up shot shows him unwrapping a lolly, turning around to find no one behind him. Suddenly, The Girl reappears in front of him and he immediately runs away. A close-up tracking shot follows the boy as he looks behind him to look for The Girl, only to crash into her as she appears ahead of him. A panning shot highlights The Girl's menacing appearance, her frightening gaze glaring down at the terrified boy.

She asks him; "Are you a good boy? Answer me. Are you a good boy or not?" (00:38:55-00:39:06). Visibly frightened, an over the shoulder shot highlights his small frame in contrast with her cloaked, lean statue. He replies; "Yes" (00:39:08-00:39:09). Bending down to his level, a panning shot follows The Girl as she examines his face. An extreme close up shot exposes her fangs as she grabs onto the boy's jacket, her voice suddenly changing into a deep and monstrous tone. Into his ear, she threatens him; "I can take your eyes out of your skull and give them to the dogs to eat. Till the end of your life, I'll watch you. Understand? … Be a good boy" (00:39:49-00:40:10). She immediately releases him after his confirmation that he will behave, a panning shot highlighting her reclaimed composure as the boy runs away into the distance. In this sense, The Girl can be viewed as a vigilante who uses her power as a monstrous vampire figure to protect women through scaring boys and men into submission. As argued by Abdi & Calafell (2017), The Girl's "actions with the boy serve a measure to intervene in early formations of masculinity and the (re)production of patriarchy" (p.364). Through this intervention, it can be implied that toxic masculine actions are learnt rather than innate behaviours that inflict danger on all genders. The young boy represents those who grow up in society such as the fictional Bad City, and witness harassment towards women as the norm. This ultimately feeds an ideology that this behaviour is acceptable and will go unpunished. However, The Girl's timely actions have hopefully instilled a fear that will follow the boy into adulthood, ultimately removing any future threat that could result in harm against women.

This ideal is also represented in *Promising Young Woman* as Cassie lives two different lives; during the day she spends her time working at a cafe dressed in a feminine pastel aesthetic. Whilst at night she wears more captivating clothing as she goes out to clubs, pretending to act drunk in order to enact revenge against men who take advantage of vulnerable women. In one of these scenes, Cassie meets Neil, who takes her back to his apartment knowing she is intoxicated

and barely able to stay awake. Upon exposing her act, Neil's behaviour changes from that of arrogant and controlling, to suddenly defensive and nervous. A wide tracking shot follows the two characters as Cassie walks towards Neil, questioning him about his behaviour. He states; "What are you trying to say? That I'm like, a predator, or something?" (00:19:13-00:19:16). To which she responds, "I don't know, are you?" (00:19:17-00:19:18). Defensively, Neil remarks; "I am a nice guy" (00:19:19-00:19:20). Annoyed at this expected answer, Cassie explains; "You keep saying that. But you aren't as rare as you think. You know how I know? … Because every week, I go to a club, and every week, I act like I'm too drunk to stand. And every fucking week, a nice guy like you comes over to see if I'm okay" (00:19:22-00:19:46). A zooming shot tightens on Cassie's face as she moves closer to Neil, pushing him into a brick wall behind him. Her posture is stoic and calm in comparison to Neil's quivering face and quiet speech. She ends her lesson with an ominous threat, reminding him; "Careful the next time you go out, Neil" (00:20:01-00:20:03). Similar to The Girl, Cassie enacts a vigilante persona by going out at night to target men who take advantage of intoxicated women. From this, she threatens these men in the hope that it will deter them from repeating these non-consensual acts on women in the future. Cassie also works by instilling fear and producing threats, simply because this is the only approach that men respond to with effective results.

This is explained by Schneider (2006), who states that this approach creates "an anxiety intrinsic to patriarchal notions of femininity: namely, that the safe, nurturing, maternal female bears hysterical, possessive, violent impulses within her very soul" (p.240). Arguably, it is because of this anxiety that men suddenly lose their bravado and ego when faced with the 'real' Cassie, whose threatening and sober demeanour inherently challenges and subverts their ideological values. Ultimately, both The Girl and Cassie use their strengths to frighten and teach masculine identities what dictates appropriate behaviour, and what the consequences of such behaviour will look like if enacted. However, to women, both protagonists represent feminist vigilantes who protect others from danger and harm at the expense of their own safety and wellbeing. Speaking on the film's subject matter in an interview with *The Guardian*, Fennell explains the emphasis for such stories to be made. As she explains;

> "I think it's important - and really starting to happen more now - for women to be making stuff. If we get the opportunity, we have to just do it. I felt a responsibility to make a revenge movie that was honest about what revenge looks like for women, what violence looks like and how sisyphean the world often feels. If there's a happy ending, I think it is that maybe the next time somebody sees a drunk girl in a nightclub, they might think twice about it" (Fleming, 2021).

Lastly, both protagonists act as a symbol for the new generation of women who work to reverse the systemic imbalances that hindered them in the past. More specifically, The Girl and Cassie work in calculated and purposeful ways to rebuild a sense of security, wealth, and justice in a society that continues to oppress both the previous and present day generations of women. In *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, this is demonstrated through the relationship that builds between The Girl and Atti, as The Girl helps to protect and uplift Atti from a life that centres on oppression and abuse from dangerous men. This is showcased in a scene between the two women, as a wide angle shot captures The Girl following Atti late at night as she is walking home. A mid-shot cuts to Atti confronting The Girl, asking: "Why are you following me? What do you want?" (01:06:23-01:06:31). In response, The Girl pulls out the necklaces and watch that belonged to Saeed, an extreme close-up shot highlighting the bejewelled wealth in her hands. Cutting to Atti's apartment, she begins questioning The Girl on her motives. Admitting that she has been following and watching Atti, a close-up shot focuses on Atti as she takes out her earrings, looking at herself in the mirror. She asks The Girl; "So…what did you see? All this time watching me?" (01:08:13-01:08:18). An extreme close-up shot cuts to The Girl, donning an expressionless and tired gaze, she states; "You're sad. You don't remember what you want. You don't remember wanting. It passed long ago. And nothing ever changes" (01:08:23-01:08:42). An extreme close-up shot cuts to Atti, staring bewildered and saddened at The Girl's observations. She replies; "Idiots and rich people are the only ones who think things can change" (01:08:52 -01:08:58).

This scene exemplifies the contrasting circumstances for both women who inhabit Bad City. Where Atti is constrained in her socio-economic freedoms and lack of autonomy, resorting to prostitution to make a regular earning, The Girl acquires her wealth through killing and taking jewellery from the dangerous men who prey on women like Atti. In doing so, she aims to help

uplift women by using her vampire persona to help Atti start a new life and leave Bad City. As explained by Howell & Baker (2022), characters such as Atti are limited "spatially, socially, and ideologically" in their ability to escape the confines of Bad City (p.128). However, because The Girl exists outside of the city's boundaries, she has the autonomous ability to release others, whilst escaping unscathed herself. In this sense, it can also be argued that The Girl represents the generational shift in social and ideological systems that result in a newfound feminine rage. Where Atti represents an older generation of women who have been beaten down by the system, The Girl, or the new generation of women, seek to destroy and change the patriarchal systems that continue to harm and hinder women.

This idea is similarly represented in *Promising Young Woman* as Cassie feels responsible for Nina's assault because she wasn't there to prevent it from happening. In her steps to rectify her feelings of guilt, she systematically keeps track of each of her victims in a notebook that she keeps under her bed. This notebook is introduced in the beginning of the film with an extreme close-up shot highlighting the numerous pages filled with tally marks to represent the number of men she has preyed upon. In this way, this notebook acts as a memento for Cassie's cause, reminding her that each mark symbolises one less dangerous man who can prey on vulnerable women. Cassie's destructive feelings of guilt and grief over her best friend's death eventually come to the forefront when visiting her best friend's childhood home, revisiting nostalgic memories with Nina's mother.

The scene opens with a wide angle shot of Cassie leaning on her car in front of the house, lost in her own thoughts. Recognizing her parked outside, Nina's mother calls her from the porch. A close-up shot cuts to the two women sitting on the front steps, reminiscing on the childhood memories that Nina and Cassie shared together. The mood quickly changes when Nina's mother looks worriedly at Cassie, a close-up shot highlighting her concerned expression. She confronts Cassie, stating; "You need to stop this. It isn't good for any of us. It's not good for Nina. It isn't good for you. Look, I know you feel bad that you weren't there, but you've got to let it go" (01:00:32-01:00:44). Cassie responds; "I'm just trying to fix it" (01:00:50-01:00:52). Sighing, the mother replies; "Oh, come on. You can't. Don't be a child, Cassie … Move on. Please. For all of us" (01:00:53-01:01:30). A zoom out shot closes the scene with Cassie sitting on the front

porch, left alone with those final words. This is an incredibly powerful scene as it provokes a sense of empathy and understanding from the audience as they are presented with Cassie's true character; a fragile and damaged young woman who grieves the death of her best friend. This scene works to humanize Cassie in showcasing her loss of innocence as she reminisces over childhood memories she shared with Nina. This is demonstrated by the close-up shots which work to create a sense of intimacy between the audience and the two characters in this scene during a private conversation. This also works in juxtaposition with the wide angle and zooming shots to expose how removed and small Cassie feels in a world that has abandoned her.

This scene ultimately reveals the extent of Cassie's unstable mental state that keeps her trapped in the past, wishing she could change events that were outside of her control. Cassie is unable to accept the unfairness of her best friend's assault, and like The Girl in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, she constantly seeks out an outlet to revolt against the societal issues that continue to disregard women. However, unlike The Girl whose story ends with her leaving Bad City to start a new life, Cassie decides to sacrifice her own to finally get justice for Nina. As explained by Creed (2022), Cassie "holds everyone responsible so that when her own death comes, what happens to Cassie stands as a stark warning to others that women will no longer sit quietly by while rape culture flourishes" (p.57).

It is ultimately only through her own death that Cassie can be free from her own internalised guilt and reclaim a sense of peace and justice. Because of this, the men who are responsible for assaulting Nina will finally receive the appropriate punishment that was initially ignored when the incident was first reported. In this sense, Cassie represents a new generation of women who are willing to challenge a system that continues to renounce and abuse women on a grand scale. As illustrated through the scene between Cassie and Nina's mother, Cassie cannot let go of the injustices that failed to protect her best friend, but is labelled as a "child" by the mother because she believes that the system will never change to favour or support women. Ultimately, this representation shapes a new angle through which to analyse and interpret female protagonists under the twenty-first century female gaze, highlighting a shift in both voice and action against systemic issues prevalent across cinematic works.

Overall, both Amirpour and Fennell have crafted a new generation of female protagonists in The Girl and Cassie through their unwavering autonomy to protect vulnerable women in societies that wish to abuse and degrade them. Purposeful and calculated, The Girl and Cassie seek revenge and retribution against targeted individuals whose ideological values continue to hinder the safety of women, revealing their justified anger and will for change. Because of this, both women act as vigilante guardians to educate all gender identities through inciting fear, to protect women through enacting physical violence or verbal threats, and to fight against systemic oppression through committing selfless acts to restore a sense of justice and equity. Ultimately, both films reveal a new female gaze that present nuanced protagonists who seek both personal and systemic vengeance against violence towards vulnerable women.

Conclusion

This research has explored foundational female directors and screenwriters whose respective works have crafted innovative female protagonists and characters from which to interpret within theories of the female gaze. My research question aimed to discover how theories of the female gaze have been explored and reconstructed by foundational filmmakers and/or screenwriters through the representation of their female protagonists. In answering this question, this thesis applied comparative text analysis through identifying key films across four significant periods in cinema history in order to identify the theories significance and continuous reconstruction by different female filmmakers across time and space. In doing so, each chapter within this thesis has examined two films per era, amounting to an overall total of six films across four periods in film history.

The findings of this analysis have concluded that each filmmaker and/or screenwriter has built on the foundations set by their predecessors to challenge the preconceived boundaries of female representation in cinema. In doing so, different directors and screenwriters across time have crafted and reconstructed theories of the gaze in crafting innovative and nuanced female protagonists who have reflected various female experiences on screen. In spite of the ever-changing media landscape, which has resulted in a variety of cinematic codes and conventions throughout film history, crafting and exploring female experiences has consistently been a topic of relevance and importance across generations of female filmmakers and screenwriters. Because of this, such filmmakers have broadened the cinematic lens to showcase female protagonists who reflect and discuss current discourses surrounding autonomy, security, and individual purpose within their socio-cultural environments.

Within each of my analysis chapters, my findings have revealed recurring thematic ideals that filmmakers have utilized in exploring the female gaze, whilst also highlighting the unique and individualistic interpretations each director/screenwriter has taken to showcase female experiences on screen. In analysing French New Wave cinema, Agnès Varda subverts tropes and conventions in her 1962 film, *Cléo from 5 to 7*. Her female protagonist, Cléo, undergoes a series of expository events that alter her foundational ideas of beauty and admiration. This journey

ultimately leads to her understanding of self-reflection in the face of her sudden mortality, altering how she views herself and others.

Garnering the traditions of the French New Wave, Barbara Loden spearheaded the New Hollywood Cinema in reconstructing the female gaze in representing individuals within working-class American society through her female protagonist, Wanda. The effectiveness in conducting comparative text analysis was reflected in the discussion of opposing female protagonists who reflect different socio-economic circumstances and individual priorities. This analysis revealed how different filmmakers interpreted and explored theories of the female gaze, through the transformation of one woman who is accustomed to being an object of the male gaze, to a woman whose existence has instead been ignored by the patriarchal systems that uphold American society. Both directors had ultimately challenged preconceived ideas of female representation in crafting two nuanced female protagonists who exist within opposing boundaries of their respective narratives.

This was similarly found within both the second and final chapters of my analysis, as my findings suggested that within the Blockbuster Age, screenwriters Callie Khouri and Gillian Flynn both built on popular contemporary discourses surrounding third-wave feminism. Both films craft female protagonists who undergo drastic transformations in an attempt to escape the damaging ideologies that pigeonhole women as standardised objects within patriarchal structures. Findings suggested that both screenwriters reconstructed the female gaze within Hollywood cinema, subverting audience expectations on female agency and the contradictory behaviours of male characters who are similarly products of a system that uphold their toxic ideologies. This tradition was similarly explored by Ana Lily Amirpour and Emerald Fennell, wherein the reconstruction of the rape-revenge film within the lens of contemporary independent cinema revealed the subversion of aesthetic and narrative styles. Both directors highlighted modern discourses to expose the complicity of rape culture and the systems that protect the violent above the vulnerable.

Through this research approach, the findings have outlined that theories of the female gaze have been a significant and recurrent phenomenon that has been explored through various forms of

representing female experiences on screen. The female protagonists within the explored narratives have demonstrated varying personal and political ideals that were reflected in the wider-societal contexts of the film narratives. As French (2021) explains;

> "The experience of gender, of living as a woman or as a man, is likely to affect any individual's subjectivity. The key marker of the 'female gaze' is the communication or expression of female subjectivity—a gaze where female agency is privileged and which is shaped by a female 'look', voice and perspective—in effect, the subjective experience or perspective of someone who lives in a female body" (p.54).

This notion has ultimately been reflected by all filmmakers and screenwriters who have brought the female gaze to the screen through expressing current discourses, social injustices, and standardized ideologies through the eyes of their female protagonists who embody and expose the spectators' understanding of such issues. Such protagonists have also revealed the necessity of challenging mainstream representations on screen, as the nuanced and complex characters that this research has analysed have accumulated an array of critique and discussion on the boundaries of female representation in film. Such discourse demonstrates the misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the female gaze, as the gaze is never expressed in a linear fashion. The filmmakers discussed in this thesis have had to reconstruct the gaze through their female protagonists in order to reiterate the endless possibilities of female expression in cinema. With such innovative protagonists and narrative structures, the potential lies for these representations to be recognized and encouraged for their contributions towards the female gaze.

To build on the foundations of the research explored in this thesis, future studies could delve into the various representations of male protagonists in films directed and/or written by women. As theories surrounding the female gaze stem from Laura Mulvey's arguments of unequal representations of female characters under the male gaze, further research could investigate how male identifying characters are depicted under the female gaze. This research could contribute to scholarly research in identifying if the female gaze similarly reinforces positive representations of male protagonists in opposition with the male gaze.

As this research has solely focused on films produced in the Western world, future research could also explore the history of the female gaze in the East in order to identify similar trends and ideologies that have been explored in previous studies. This research could examine various female filmmakers to analyse how representations of female experiences and ideologies may differentiate and/or follow contrasting styles. As this thesis has revealed the various socio-cultural circumstances that underpinned many of the filmmakers narrative decisions, similar studies could indicate similar developments that are foundational in the representations of female protagonists in Eastern cinema.

This thesis will contribute to the field of media studies by locating and identifying the traditions of the female gaze throughout set periods in cinema history. In analysing four significant eras of cinema, I have linked a timeline of foundational female filmmakers and screenwriters whose works have been essential to the construction of the female gaze and advanced the phenomenon into contemporary discourses. Each chapter of analysis has revealed the cinematic traditions and socio-cultural influences that have underpinned the representation of the gaze and impacted future filmmakers to build on the foundations laid out by their predecessors. Through comparing two female protagonists within set periods of cinema, I have analysed and connected common traits, socio-cultural ideologies, and filmic techniques that have been adopted to explore representations of female experiences on screen. This research has answered the research question, how have theories of the female gaze been explored and reconstructed by female filmmakers and/or screenwriters through the representation of their female protagonists?

Due to limited literature surrounding the representation of female protagonists within theories of the female gaze, this thesis has addressed a timeline of foundational characters who have demonstrated the evolving attitudes and trends of female filmmakers in crafting multi-faceted and nuanced representations of female experiences on screen. Similarly, this thesis has advanced literature within theories of the female gaze in revisiting foundational films and identifying their significance in defying traditions and expectations to subvert and reinvent how female characters are portrayed within set codes and conventions. This thesis has impacted preconceived notions of the male gaze set by Laura Mulvey, as the findings of this research has identified the tradition of the female gaze throughout cinema history. Although mainstream Hollywood cinema has

frequently catered to a male gaze, the analysis on the Blockbuster Age has identified two male directors whose collaboration with female screenwriters has positively reconstructed mainstream representation of female-centred narratives and characters. Such protagonists have proclaimed their independence in displaying unapologetic stances towards the patriarchal systems that fail to recognize the dangers of undermining female autonomy and self-actualization. Overall, this thesis has identified the progression and development of the female gaze into today's cinematic landscape, ultimately advancing the literature surrounding the gazes' prominence and importance in illustrating newfound forms of female representations in an ever changing media environment.

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