

Oppression and Females' Defending in the Devil Wears Prada

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Abstract. Although the film industry has improved in terms of portraying female characters since the 1960s, there are still issues visible to the public, and one is the hidden objectification of females in supposedly feminist movies. Another popular opinion recently, especially on Chinese social media platforms, is that fashion acts as a tool of the patriarchy to force the male gaze onto women. However, this paper intends to discuss how the fashion industry acts as a non-patriarchal field that provides opportunities for females in terms of improving themselves. The movie, *The Devil Wears Prada*, will be analyzed as an example to explain how the fashion industry, in this movie, does not consist of the male gaze and propels the main character's growth. The approaches used in this paper are Laura Mulvey's gaze theory and analyzing specific scenes in the movie, *The Devil Wears Prada*. The scenes will be analyzed using the apparatus theory in films, explaining how the different types of shots influence the message conveyed in the movie. In conclusion, this paper reveals that even a feminist film like *The Devil Wears Prada* contains various circumstances of the male gaze; however, these circumstances of the male gaze influencing women do not appear because of the fashion industry, and consequently, the fashion industry should not be disapproved as a source of the male gaze, as it provides opportunities for women to improve themselves in terms of their career and wellbeing.

Keywords: Feminist film, *The Devil Wears Prada*, the male gaze, fashion industry.

1. Introduction

The movie *The Devil Wears Prada* is a model of a female-dominating film, featuring various multifaceted female characters and a few main male characters [1]. The females in this film are portrayed as kind, intelligent, persevering, and struggling individuals, rather than hysteric or obedient women who are given little screen time, in most movies before the 1970s [2]. Before the 1970s, Hollywood filmmaking took up the majority of the film industry, which consisted of a large extent of male gaze, meaning that it depicts women as passive, overly sexualized roles and provides the pleasure of looking through scopophilia [3]. Based on this logic, according to Laura Mulvey, the only way for women to free themselves from the modern structure of male-dominated filmmaking is to destroy shots that sexualize and objectify women. *The Devil Wears Prada* focuses more on different aspects of females' lives, such as finding the balance between relationships and careers, leading this movie to be considered by the majority as a feminist movie. However, the male gaze, a product of the patriarchal society, still has a conspicuous impact on the females in the movie, in particular affecting their sense of body image and self-worth. As increasingly more young females are becoming aware of the male gaze's negative influence on women, some suggest that women appearing in the fashion industry are under the influence of male gaze [4]. Females, suffering from the male gaze and the criteria of "good women", are trained to put on their best appearances in order to attract males, according to typical societal opinion. This paper aims to discuss the male gaze and the fashion industry's representations in the movie, *The Devil Wears Prada*, and analyze the influence of the fashion industry on a woman. The theory frame used in this paper is Laura Mulvey's theory of the gaze. Through the detailed analyses of scenes in the movie, explaining from perspectives of the film apparatus and types of shots, this paper aims to help females develop more critical thinking opportunities in terms of the male gaze's influences on them and draw more attention to the fashion industry's effect on women.

2. Male Gaze and the Film

Male gaze is prevalent in today's society and does actual harm to females, with one example being the hidden cameras capturing women changing clothes in a boutique in Candolim, Goa [5]. The male gaze is the projection of males' fantasies on females, making the latter become eroticized objects [6]. Such kind of visual pleasure for males appears commonly in *The Devil Wears Prada*, a movie described by The Atlantis Press as the representation of New Feminism, a branch concept of feminism that focuses on finding the harmony between different aspects of life [7]. However, a feminist movie like *The Devil Wears Prada* still contains scenes of the male gaze, which can make the audience, females in particular, feel uncomfortable. This section analyzes how specific shots that objectify women influence the message conveyed and the characteristics of the roles in the movie.

A scene demonstrating the male gaze in an obvious approach is when Andrea, the main character and the woman shown in this scene, tries to end the fight between her and her boyfriend by trying to seduce him with her new lingerie. This shows the lack of independence of Andrea and creates a contrast between her usual driven and striving characteristic. The diversity of a woman's character is reduced under a portrayal like the one in this scene—a woman only capable of solving problems using sexual desires. Andrea's ability to handle numerous, challenging asks that Miranda, her boss, gives her, is gone when she is depicted as a woman with little intelligence, trying to resolve everything using sex. The male gaze has reduced a woman's powers in scenes like this one.



Fig. 1 Christian Thompson looks at Andrea Sachs in an objectifying way. From *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) [1]

The male gaze appears again when Andrea Sachs encounters Christian Thompson, a renowned writer and journalist, at a party (Fig. 1). This medium close-up from Andrea Sachs' point of view shows Christian Thompson's judging facial expression and his desire in terms of the female's sexuality rather than having a normal conversation with an individual with intelligence. Considering Thompson's later actions, which all directed to his desire to have sexual intercourse with Andrea Sachs, he ignores the respectable personalities, such as persevering regarding the tough job as Miranda's assistant, of the female in front of him, treating Andrea Sachs as a pure means to an end [8].

The instances of the male gaze discussed above in *The Devil Wears Prada* contradict the picture of Andrea Sachs portrayed at work, which is devoted and determined, conveying a false image of Andrea Sachs under the male gaze of the men in her life.

3. The Impact of the Fashion Industry

Fashion trends are products of the fashion industry and social media and reflect the link between one's sense of body image and their clothing choices [9]. Inevitably, one question is raised: Do females' appealing clothing choices represent their desire to attract others or their suffering of the

male gaze? This issue has been discussed intensely on Chinese social media platforms recently with the name “beauty duty”, which is the costly and unfair demands for women to dress up delicately and to always appear beautiful [10]. Increasingly more feminists in China are fighting “beauty duty” because they want to “feel and explore the world as an individual without having to care about whether or not [they] meet the standards in other people’s eyes.” While this approach is reasonable in terms of fighting the patriarchy, numerous women who fight “beauty duty” by cutting their hair short and abandoning applying cosmetics disapprove the entire fashion industry to this end [11]. However, the fashion industry presented in *The Devil Wears Prada* acts as an approach for the main character to improve her competence in the workplace and to develop a clearer goal in life, which does not convey messages of objectifying women. The fashion industry also holds great opportunities for females to attain paramount powers.

During the opening titles, multiple scenes of women preparing themselves for the day are displayed separately, creating a tense feeling of rushing to work in the morning. These scenes oppose the typical male-dominating films that objectify women and present scopophilia. Although they show close-ups of women’s different parts of bodies, they do not carry sexualized connotations, which does not make the audience, especially females, feel uncomfortable and offended. The greatness of this sequence of close-ups of women preparing for the day is that women are finally pictured as important, intelligent roles, rather than mere ends of sexual desires for men inside and outside the movie. The women in this sequence are perceived as employees who sincerely care for their careers as they make efforts to improve their appearance and arrive on time at work as well.



Fig. 2 Miranda Priestly’s husband accuses her of being too busy at work. From *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) [1]

Working in the fashion industry has created opportunities of gaining rights and abilities for women. Figure 2 is a point-of-view shot from the perspective of Andrea as she sneaks up the stairs of Miranda’s house. This scene shows the quarrel between Miranda and her husband. The husband accuses Miranda of occupying personal time for work and shows concern and discontentment through his facial expression. His gaze oppresses Miranda, a condescending and powerful woman in the workplace, which creates a surprising contrast for the audience. In addition, the audience can sense how strong the impact of the patriarch is to make such a condescending woman like Miranda become almost pleading when talking to her husband. The pressure of the patriarchy appears outside Miranda’s workplace, which is the fashion industry, where she has absolute powers and outstanding abilities. Andrea Sachs, on the other hand, learns about the pressure Miranda burdens emphasizes with her as Andrea has also encountered the pressure of the patriarchal society and later devotes more energy to her job.



Fig. 3 Miranda struggles because of her divorce. From *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) [1]

The above scene also shows Miranda's being vulnerable as she encounters pressure from the patriarchal society. The medium close-up (Fig. 3) captures Miranda's facial expressions clearly and shows that she is having a breakdown. Her concerns come from society's attacks on her getting another divorce and the harm they will have on her children. Miranda is both a leader with powers at her workplace and abilities and a mother torn between being herself and protecting her children from the vicious words of the outside world. She is not a woman limited by the Common Woman's routine of "Children-Kitchen-Church" [12]. Once again, a woman's outstanding abilities at the workplace and her weakness under the patriarchy are depicted in the movie. The heroine sits across Miranda and tries to sympathize with her. Her presence with her boss has proved her outstanding competence as an assistant because she is able to witness the weak moments of Miranda, which Miranda hides the majority of the time.

The final scene selected is Emily, the former top assistant of Miranda, getting hit by a car as she hurries to run errands for Miranda, an indication that her status has lowered because running difficult errands is the duty of a newly hired assistant, according to the traditions at Runway. Considering that chores like this were once Andrea Sachs' duties, her personal growth becomes clear to the audience. There is the possibility that this scene would confuse the audience regarding the fact that Miranda's assistants are willing to sacrifice their health and even risk lives to fulfill their boss's demands. This confusion can be explained by Miranda's high authority at the Runway company; in other words, her assistants are most likely to dedicate their lives to this job because of the pressure Miranda enforces on the whole firm as a chief executor. The chaos depicted in this scene shows Miranda's superior abilities and authority over her employees and thus creates a larger contrast between her pleading tone in front of her husband and her authority at work, proving again that the fashion industry is a place providing females with rights that propel them to improve or achieve high statuses instead of a product of the male gaze.

4. Conclusion

The Devil Wears Prada consists of many diverse female characters with unique personalities; however, as explained through many shots, the impact of the patriarchy is still intense in the movie. The contrast between women's powers under certain circumstances and the helplessness of being constrained by men provides a much more memorable and intriguing effect and makes females more concerned about the status of feminist movies. However, the male gaze in this film appears outside the fashion industry, a place where women could use their abilities to make contributions and be treated with respect. The fashion industry is not a product of the male gaze that harms females but an opportunity for women to develop their competence at work and counteract the patriarchal pressure from many components of society. Although it is still controversial that fashion and feminism are

contradicting concepts, the phenomenon that females are taking initiatives to contemplate these terms is encouraging the development of feminism.

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