The Expression of Male Gaze in Film Art: Take *Kill Bill* and *The Great Beauty* as Examples

Leyi Pan

Jiangsu University, Zhenjiang 212000, Jiangsu, China

Abstract: British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey points out that there is a relationship between the film industry and the women of the screen in terms of the gaze and the gazed upon. This relationship is manifested on three levels - the level of the camera shot, the level of the text of the screenplay, and the level of the cinema audience’s viewing. On these three levels, the camera uses the lens, the scriptwriter uses the pen and the audience uses their eyes, all three conspiring to form a gaze on women. Two famous films, *The Great Beauty* and *Kill Bill*, differ in their themes, plots and characterisation, but from certain perspectives it is possible to see the male gaze in all of them.

Keywords: Gender, Male gaze, *Kill Bill*, *The Great Beauty*.

1. Introduction

Paolo Sorrentino is a new generation of Italian film directors. There is a lack of research on his work in China, with only articles in core film journals and short reviews on the internet. The search records on the subject of Paolo Sorrentino only contained three articles in core film journals and two master’s theses. Meanwhile, the literature search revealed that scholars’ research on Paolo Sorrentino’s film works mainly focused on *The Great Beauty*. Among them, Huang Xuejian focuses on Paolo Tarantino’s film creation philosophy in terms of post-modern narrative strategies, non-heroic characterisation and spectralised image style, while Cao Kaizhong takes the films *The Great Beauty* and *to Rome with Love* as examples and examines in depth how “placeness” and “non-placeness” are used in the films. “Wang Cuiying and Cui Yanling focus on the connotations and artistic expression of language in *The Great Beauty*, while Yang Su and Wang Mengdong focus on the deeper thematic connotations of the film through its plot areas. In contrast, although research on Sorrentino’s work abroad is limited, there are more specialised dissertations, such as Yale University’s Rabissi, Francesco’s doctoral thesis on ‘Visionary Realism’ in the New Italian Political Cinema’. However, the main focus is on realism and there is no discursive study of creative style. In terms of journals, more scholars have studied the stylisation of directors, such as O’Neill, Desmond’s ‘Ageing with style’ published in *The Lancet*. In addition, the works studied are no longer limited to *The Great Beauty*, but have become more diverse, such as Rapold, Nicolas’ analysis of *This Must Be the Place* and Alleva, Richard’s ‘Codgers & Kids: YOUTH’ focuses on ‘Youth’, and ‘A Kangaroo in the Vatican’ by Wren, Celia turns to ‘The Young Pope’.

Quentin Tarantino quickly rose to fame as a director with a unique style in the 1990s. Domestic scholars have launched more studies on Quentin Tarantino’s film works, and most of them are related to the aesthetics of violence. For example, Hu Jiawei, Ren Xuehua, Huang Suyu and Zhang Yi have all used *Kill Bill* as an example to analyse the connotation, development and performance of the aesthetics of violence. Secondly, scholars such as Wen Qiong, Xing Jing, Li Chao, Shang Xiuqiao and Chen Dan focus on Quentin Tarantino’s postmodernist film style and postmodernist narrative analysis. Scholars such as Lin Jiaying, Liu Snapdragon and Zhang Wenyi, on the other hand, turn to a new perspective to explore the feminism expressed in the film. In addition, despite the large number of studies on *Kill Bill*, some scholars have also explored other film works. Yue Xun, for example, explores the importance of lines in *Pulp Fiction*, while Liu Yanjuan and Yan Nina provide insights into the idea of democracy and freedom in *Django Unchained*.

This paper will differ from the perspectives of previous scholars to better explore the representation of the male gaze in two famous films, *The Great Beauty* and *Kill Bill*, by referring to British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, published in 1975.

2. Male gaze in The Great Beauty

The director of *The Great Beauty*, Sorrentino, is a very good visual constructor. In terms of narrative structure, the film uses a combination of passages to collage the structure of the film, the “journey pattern”. It opens with a quote from the famous French novelist Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s masterpiece *Journey to the End of Night*, which illustrates the journey. In the cinematography of the film, he uses extreme extroversion of the moving camera style to create an ironic emotional effect. For example, Sorrentino opens the film with a montage of moving shots at varying angles, allowing the audience to enter the city of Rome with a poetic feeling similar to the opening of Evans’ *Rain*. The vast majority of the moving photography is not intended to show the subjective psychological states associated with Jep, nor the suspense-surprise-satisfaction pattern associated with the temporal dimension, but rather independent movement unrelated to the subject. Its purpose is to constantly change the spatial structure and to create a distinctive sense of rhythm. At the same time, Fellini-style humour and visual metaphors are also evident in the film.

In the film *The Great Beauty*, the male gaze, a way of depicting and looking at women, is reflected in the best way. It is clear that all scenes in the film are observed and presented from Jep’s view. We saw what Jep saw, or other people saw. The determining male gaze (Jep) projects its fantasy onto the female figure (Talia), which is portrayed accordingly. In the traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed. Their appearance is encoded for strong visual and has an erotic impact. Thus, they can be said...
to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Women are displayed as sexual objects, holding the gaze and indicating male desire.

Take the example of female performance artist Talia. Before the seminar, I thought that the point of Talia’s act of exposing her body to the public and running until she hit the wall hard and then screaming was to disrupt men’s visual pleasure. But through discussion with the professor, I understood that Talia’s performance had nothing to do with pleasure or the sexual gaze. Rather, Talia was escaping the male gaze in some way. So in a way it can be said that Talia may represent a very much female character, challenging Jep’s very traditional view of women and the male gaze. This can be seen in Jep’s interview conversation with Talia.

3. Male gaze in Kill Bill

However, in the film Kill Bill, filmmaker Quentin Tarantino’s depiction of women is very intuitive. The film takes women as the main point of view, with intuitive elements of violence and killing throughout the film, thus providing a straightforward representation of female resistance to patriarchy. In other words, he fully integrates feminism into the stylistic framework of the violent aesthetic, which in a way seems to eschew the male gaze.

For example, it is clear that, unlike the male world that has been constructed in many films, the protagonist of the film is replaced by a woman. The main character, “the Bride”, was hunted by Bill after she betrayed the rules of his game. She narrowly escaped death and was driven by the fire of revenge to hunt down her enemies. A typical example is the Battle of House of Blue Leaves, in which “the Bride” killed all of O-Ren’s men with her Japanese steel. Also, it is striking that almost all of her opponents were men. The second film ended with Bill’s easy death at the hands of the Bride’s Five-Point-Palm Exploding-Heart Technique, suggesting a subversive victory of female over male hegemony.

Secondly, the film’s fast-paced, non-linear narrative mode, which combines montage editing with a rich musical score, allows for a clear and concise transition between time and space. It results in a fluid plot and full-bodied characters. Quentin’s use of overdubbed music also adds a unique artistic dimension to the film. Take the female figure of the tragic killer O-Ren as an example. The film initially uses animation with narration to introduce a tragic childhood experience and the reasons for her journey into the underworld. The soundtrack for this element is “Armageddon”, a tune that is at times mournful and melancholy, accompanied by eerie harmonica sounds. The soprano, which builds in volume during the climactic scene, elevates O-Ren’s melancholy to the highest level. Still, in the animated section, the grown-up O-Ren has become a ruthless killer after everything that happened in her childhood, and here the soundtrack is ‘Fay Run’. The tight drumming and occasional key changes bring the film up to speed, pulling the viewer back from the pity of the previous scene to be amazed by the brave, sharp O-Ren with her high level of sniper skills.

Thirdly, the film’s camera work is also cleverly chosen. After the fight inside the house, a deep shot from upstairs brings the brutal and bloody scene to life, giving the audience a sense of excitement and shock, thus reflecting the immediacy and devastation of the violence. Another camera downstairs is positioned in front of “the bride” who is standing over the railing in the elevated shot. It gives a feeling of looking up and oppression. This set-up shows the absolute dominance and power of the female protagonist “the bride”.

4. Conclusion

Regarding the film Kill Bill, the combination of the above might lead to the conclusion that it is a feminist film. But in a way if one looks at it from a completely different perspective, for example, the heroine has very little femininity and is only associated with revenge and violence, it is simply an action film. In other words, Quentin may have taken a more extreme approach to the male gaze by putting the woman at the centre of the film, i.e. by swapping the roles of men and women. For both films, it would be more meaningful to examine the way in which the study shifts from the male or female dimension, rather than necessarily reversing the male and female gaze, which will serve as a direction for further research in the future.

References