

Iris Brey, *The Female Gaze*  
Introduction  
pp. 9-20.

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The female gaze exists. It is a gaze that allows us to share the lived experience of a female body onscreen. It is not a gaze created by female artists, but rather one that takes the point of view of a female character in order to embrace her experience. To create it, filmmakers had to physically change the body of the camera as well as how images are recorded; they had to invent and reinvent filmic forms in order to come as close as possible to women's experiences. From Alice Guy, who in her 1906 film *Madame's Cravings* (*Madame a des envies*) was the first to use the close-up for dramatic purposes, to Phoebe Waller-Bridge (*Fleabag*, 2016), who uses the direct address to create a connection, rather than a distance, between the heroine and viewers, the female gaze is here, right before our eyes.

And yet, although since the beginning of cinema, numerous films have foregrounded this perspective, the female gaze seems to have been relegated to an underground, invisible culture. It has, as a result, taken on its own kind of power and aura: that of secret works that exist in whispers, in the sighs of those who do not recognize themselves in dominant cinema. That of a collection of images that call on us to desire differently, to explore our bodies, to allow our experiences to profoundly move and affect us. These images must be named and defined.

*The Female Gaze: A Revolution Onscreen* traces imaginary and actual connections and lineages between works from the past and the present. Bringing these films into conversation with one another makes it possible to give them and their creators a place in the history of cinema, as well as to generate a *poesis* of images: that is, a shared visual language. Although the term "female gaze" has become widespread over the past few years, the phenomenon itself is not new to the post-Me Too era. The female experience has always been portrayed in cinema, but its impact has not yet been theorized. Until now, no book that defines the female gaze as anything other than "women's movies" has been written. And since the term is now commonly used in the media, I felt it necessary to look with fresh eyes at our audiovisual patrimony and matrimony—not in the service of revisionism, but in order to give value to the feminine.

Third-wave feminism originally focused on defining gender as a social construct, before turning its attention to “queer zones”<sup>1</sup> and fluidity. It was the air I breathed during my doctoral studies at New York University. This new theoretical framework became a playground rich with possibilities both for academic studies and for conceptualizing the self. Queer theory brought with it the wind of freedom, infinite possibilities, new sexual regimes. It might seem counter to that movement to circumscribe what is “female” within a gaze; the expression “female gaze” might appear essentialist, restrictive, or to correspond to a form of sexual determinism. And yet, I am convinced it is the right expression.

In the first place, because it echoes the “male gaze” theorized by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”<sup>2</sup> However, I do not consider the female gaze to be the mirror concept of the male gaze, just as the feminine is not the mirror of the masculine. For me, it represents a new way of apprehending images. This is what the philosopher Sandra Laugier gets wrong in her article on the latest Quentin Tarantino film, *Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood*<sup>3</sup>: she reads the shot of Brad Pitt bare-chested as a form of female gaze, whereas representing the body—whether male or female—as an object of desire is still a form of male gaze. The female gaze films bodies as subjects of desire. We can choose to engage with this terminology and at the same time abandon the male-female binary in favor of a proliferation of possibilities, a *differance*.<sup>4</sup> Taking the same approach to the female gaze that Derrida took when he hijacked the word “difference” [*différence*] and turned it into “*differance*” [*différance*] allows us to unpack the expression and grasp its complexity, to understand it as an element that comes from the margin and destabilizes the dominant order, and to find a way out of phallogocentric discourse.

This is why I have chosen to take a thematic approach to the concept in this book. In the first chapter, I analyze the female gaze, its definition and stakes, by examining in detail how it differs from the male gaze. In the second chapter, I turn to my encounter with the female gaze of filmmakers Alice Guy, Jane Campion, and Céline Sciamma, and examine how this gaze corresponds to a new aesthetics of desire. In the third chapter, I explore representations of rape

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Bourcier, *Queer Zones. La triologie* (Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

<sup>3</sup> Sandra Laugier, “*Il était une fois...à Hollywood, la soif du mâle*,” *Libération*, September 5, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> “The play of *différance*...prevents any word, any concept, any major enunciation from coming to summarize and to govern from the theological presence of a center the movement and textual spacing of differences.” Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 14.

through the lens of female gaze in the work of Paul Verhoeven, Virginie Despentes, Ida Lupino, and in the television series *The Handmaid's Tale*. Within the history of cinema, it is rare to see rape from the point of view of a female character; sexual violence against women is usually eroticized. In the fourth chapter, I focus on sexual pleasure and study how the female orgasm sends shivers across our screens, particularly in the films of Chantal Ackerman, Barbara Hammer, Andrea Arnold, and the television series of Jill Soloway. Lastly, in the fifth and final chapter, I follow the bodies in motion of the liberated heroines—that is, heroines who have thrown off the chains of patriarchy and live their sexuality freely—found in the works of Dorothy Arzner, Agnès Varda, Barbara Loden, and Marie-Claude Treilhou. These heroines challenge the norm, sending shockwaves through it. All these works have the female gaze in common. The present book generates an initial corpus of works that embody the female gaze: a plural, living, hybrid body that exemplifies “staying with the trouble.”<sup>5</sup>

It seems to me necessary to use the expression “female gaze” today to highlight the experiences of women. Even if we are living in a queer, fluid, and trans era, such experiences—linked to the female body—have not yet been defined. Not putting words to representations of female experiences, not daring to analyze them, is a way of rendering invisible the point of view of a “minority.” I watched hundreds of films and series for the writing of this book, and I was shocked at how rarely experiences connected to female bodies (whether cisgender or transgender) are shown. Physiological experiences (breasts growing, periods, orgasms, abortions, childbirth, clitoridectomy, menopause) as well as sociological experiences (exclusion, domination, sexual violence, rape) are all ignored, as if they were of no importance. Our onscreen fictions, which are mostly written, produced, and directed by men, demonstrate flagrant contempt for women. Those works that do embrace female experiences question relations of power and domination both within the narrative and outside of it, power relations on set as well as between viewers and works, asking: what is the power of the one who views?

In traditional Western philosophy, the mind and language are given more importance than the body, and the same is true in film criticism, which celebrates films that remain at a distance from the body. The most famous filmmakers are “intellectuals”; their works are stuffed full of references familiar to film buffs (i.e., references to other movies made by men!) And

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<sup>5</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

similarly, analyzing a movie amounts to viewing it as an object, reflecting on the position of the (male) viewer, and setting aside the corporality of what is an embodied, sensory experience. Feminist criticism has often analyzed films by contrasting female viewers and male viewers, female characters and male characters, and has been centered around the idea of the viewer's identification with the hero. The importance of the body to cinema was largely ignored until the 1990s and 2000s, when thinkers following in the vein of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy began to develop a new theoretical framework, in which the lived experience that arises out of the encounter between a viewer and a film is at the heart of an exchange.<sup>6</sup> My discovery of the phenomenological approach to cinema lifted a weight from my shoulders: I was no longer obliged to think about films in terms of traditional spectatorial identification, but was free to take into account the fact that watching is above all an embodied experience, in which the body plays a fundamental role. The present work uses a phenomenological and feminist approach to explore the contours of the female gaze.

Within the phenomenological tradition in philosophy, the body is understood not as a fixed object but as a moving subject. How this distinction plays out on screen is encapsulated in a story the filmmaker Desiree Akhavan told me during the release of her series *The Bisexual* (2018), a story that also underscores how the male gaze can sneak into a shot if one is not careful. On set, she realized that the framing her director of photography was using sexualized the body of an actress in a scene in which she was dancing at a party: "I physically pushed my director of photography aside so that the actress's body went from the edge to the center of the frame, and immediately, the impact of the image changed, her breasts were no longer the focal point, she no longer seemed vulnerable. All of a sudden, you saw her movements and her entire body forming the shape of the letter S." A subtle reframing, the significance of which escaped the man holding the camera. "You can feel the difference between dancing with the character and watching her body dance. It's a visual language. If you're interested in the cause of women, the lens you use will show that."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Teresa Castro notes that, for Laura Mulvey,

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<sup>6</sup> On the experience of the female body, see Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); on the connection between cinema and phenomenology, see Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). More recent books by Laura U. Marks, Jenny Chamarette, and Kate Ince have also contributed rich and original points of view to film studies. In France, the philosophers Manon Garcia and Camille Froidevaux-Metterie have studied the links between feminism and phenomenology.

<sup>7</sup> Iris Brey and Olivier Joyard, "The Bisexual: la série qui montre qu'il y a du pouvoir dans le plaisir," *Les Inrockuptibles*, December 3, 2018.

filmmakers who objectify the female body choose a *mise-en-scène* that reflects a desire to deprive a female character of power: “close-ups that cut her stylized body into pieces and a shot/reverse shot system that feeds sadistic voyeurism and fetishistic fascination ultimately constitute a response to the threat she represents to the patriarchal order.”<sup>8</sup> The female gaze, through its choice of *mise-en-scène*, consciously denounces “cinema’s mechanisms of illusion” so that in watching, viewers remain active, their bodies taut and stretched towards the images. Take the following two contrasting examples. We might feel we are held hostage by Abdellatif Kechiche’s films *Mektoub, My Love: Canto Uno* and *Intermezzo* (2018; 2019), for they force upon us a *ritornello* of shots of the buttocks of women we are supposed to desire, as if the filmmaker were imposing his libido on us without our consent. In contrast, in watching Céline Sciamma’s *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, 2019), we remain active, we participate in the work as we view it. It is all a matter of perspective, of point of view and distance. The female gaze in *Portrait* is not the opposite of the male gaze in *Mektoub*, and my goal here is not to analyze these films by contrasting them, but rather to reflect on the room each filmmaker gives us, and on the physical experiences we have in front of these images.

The idea of being active while one is seated facing a screen—participating in the experience of films and series—can sometimes remain abstract. But there are certain cinematographic techniques that can activate the gaze. In the films of Chantal Akerman and Sally Potter, direct address (theorized by Brecht), creates a process of distancing that can block processes of seduction and emotional investment between a viewer and the heroine.<sup>9</sup> There are also other, more traditional techniques: voice-over narration, like June’s in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, or the subjective camera, which adopts the heroine’s point of view, as when in the series *I Love Dick*, Chis feels the eyes of the two men she is eating dinner with on her. We experience her exclusion, her feeling of not belonging to the boy’s club. Similarly, dreams and visions can

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<sup>8</sup> Teresa Castro, “Introduction,” in Laura Mulvey, *Au-delà du plaisir visual*, trans. F. Lahache and M. Monteiro (Paris: Editions Mimésis, 2017), p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> The direct address can also have the opposite effect. Monika’s direct address in Ingmar Bergman’s film does not play the same role as Orlando’s in Sally Potter’s film. In *Monika*, the young woman looks at the spectator to seduce him or her, to get him or her on her side, to invite him or her into her bed—thus, to reinforce the emotional investment between those who watch and a female character. This direct address can be considered a sexual act: Monika offers us her face and says “Follow me” in a scene in which she decides to leave her husband and child to pursue carnal experiences. In contrast, in *Orlando*, the direct address prevents the male gaze, by re-establishing the power dynamic between viewers and the hero. In looking at us, Orlando reminds us that this character is not an object, but rather an autonomous subject. These examples demonstrate just how crucial it is to analyze *mise-en-scène* in order to determine whether we are witnessing a male gaze or a female gaze.

interrupt the narrative sequence of events and plunge the viewer into a character's unconscious. Here we may think of the surrealist films of Germaine Dulac (*La Souriante Madame Beudet/The Smiling Madame Beudet*, 1923) and Maya Deren (*Meshes of the Afternoon*, 1943), as well as Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* (1967), which opens with Séverine's fantasy of being whipped while bound to a tree. In such instances, we enter directly into what goes through a heroine's desiring body. And finally, the close-up, as we shall see in the case of Alice Guy's *Madame's Cravings*, can be used not to carve up a body in order to objectify it, as in pornographic films (or, more poetically, in the work of D.W. Griffith), but in order to give texture to a shot and, above all, to share in the heroine's desire. By filming skin from very close up, a film can take on a haptic quality rather than an erotic charge (this is the case in Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* and Rose Troche's *Go Fish*). The viewer's pleasure then comes not from perceiving a body-object but rather from having the impression of being able to touch these bodies. The female gaze proposes a way of desiring that is no longer based on asymmetrical power relations, but instead on equality and reciprocity. All of the techniques I have just mentioned, which aim to subvert the genre conventions typically used in dramatic or sensationalist moments (for example, by rejecting subjective shots to prevent catharsis, or using an almost clinical *mise-en-scène* to create the felt experience of a new form of violence and to cut off any sense of voyeurism—as in the murder scene in *Jeanne Dielman*) can create what Laura Mulvey calls “a passionate detachment.” The female gaze is a conscious act, and as a result, it produces conscious, politicized images. It does not happen by chance; it is a way of thinking.

Analyzing the female gaze opens up many new fields of thought and asks us to re-evaluate the images that have nurtured—and perhaps beguiled—our love of movies, to question the images we have already encountered and to search out those that have disappeared from our screens. These lesser-known images are right before our eyes; it is up to us, together, to take on the task of giving value to them. By bringing these works into conversation and giving them a new theoretical framework, I hope this book will contribute to turning this counter-culture into a collective experience and to transforming the films and series borne by the female gaze into a culture visible to all gazes.