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Desire in *Bridgerton*: Defining the Female Gaze

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in English.

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Under the mentorship of Dr. Joe Pellegrino

ABSTRACT

Feminist literature is rife with multiple, sometimes conflicting, sometimes partial, definitions of the female gaze. A definitive understanding of the female gaze incorporates the literature but includes other modes of thought and analysis appropriate for a number of different media. *Bridgerton* articulates this understanding as it privileges female sexuality not just through dialogue, but through its focus on multiple characters' bodily awareness. Non-verbal elements like blocking, the physical articulation of bodies, changes in camera angles and foci that privilege subtle and nuanced movements, and even the pervasive use of music all contribute to the form and characterization of the female gaze. All of these elements create an emphasis on feeling and internal thought which is more important than the ongoing action. The plot becomes secondary to the characters and their personalities upsetting the entire flow of the male gaze. *Bridgerton* illustrates this definition with an emphasis on slow touch and by showcasing not only the female perspective and background but the male's as well. Thus, the eroticism of the male body in the female gaze is not of a passive object but one of holistic appreciation of the character.

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On December 25, 2020, *Bridgerton* aired on Netflix and rapidly became one of the most-watched series that year. Two seasons of the show are currently released and the third is being filmed. Season 1 has so far been lauded for its representation of female agency and desire in Regency-era England and the term “the female gaze” has been unceremoniously draped across the series all over social media. Media of every kind has claimed that the female gaze is present in *Bridgerton*, but little to no sources actually define the female gaze or describe how it is depicted in the show. Much of this ambiguity arises from the lack of definition of the female gaze in feminist criticism at any level.

In 1973 Laura Mulvey coined the term “the male gaze” in her cinematic analysis (19). Mulvey went into staggering detail describing the male gaze and demonstrating it in cinema of the time. She analyzed the impact of the male gaze on actors and the audience. She did not, however, discuss women in extensive detail, except as an object that connotes a “to-be-looked-at-ness” (19). Women are notoriously absent from the audience in Mulvey’s analysis. Although the existence of the male gaze implies the presence of a female gaze, Mulvey never mentions it. Mulvey’s analysis of women is limited to their role as an object on the screen.

Feminist scholars have highlighted the total lack of women in Mulvey’s analysis of the audience of a movie. Later, in response to these writings, Mulvey published “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ inspired by King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun* (1946)” to respond to these critiques. Mulvey explained that, although she stands by her previous publication, she wants to explore women in the audience and what happens when women are the center of a film (29). Unfortunately, this article still leaves critics without a definition of the female gaze. Her work has since been used widely in film analysis.

In the years since Mulvey's publications, the female gaze has remained stubbornly undefined and lacking in academic examination. Logically speaking, if Mulvey's definition of the male gaze is accepted, the female gaze would simply mean the opposite. To explore this, the male gaze must be distilled into essential characteristics. These characteristics should then replace "male" with "female" and vice versa. Unfortunately, it is not that simple. This version of the female gaze creates a definition that is lacking when applied to film. This method generates a female gaze that is objectifying and only able to apply to highly specific scenarios. Thus, scholars of literature, film, and feminism have spent decades trying to define the female gaze.

Numerous scholars claim that they have discovered *the* definition of the female gaze, with works ranging from peer-reviewed articles in academic journals to blog posts on personal websites, but several of these definitions are in direct contradiction to one another or they take bits and pieces from each other. Many are so specific they struggle with demonstrating the gaze of a whole group of people – or even struggle with applying to any other sources – and others are so broad that there is no real distinction between the male gaze and the female gaze. It seems that the only thing these scholars agree on is that there is probably a female gaze and it is probably different from the male gaze.

Recently, the spotlight on the female gaze has been directed toward *Bridgerton*. This television series aired on Netflix and immediately skyrocketed to worldwide popularity. The series follows the Bridgerton family as they navigate societal mores and expectations in the quest for love. The popularity of *Bridgerton* has continued to grow and has expanded to include plans for a spin-off show and even a fan-made musical based on the first season.

By using a methodical approach using logic and Mulvey's work on the male gaze as a basis this research will explore the female gaze, offer a definition, and put the definition into

practice using the first season of *Bridgerton*. To be clear, the single definition of the female gaze offered is not a holistic one. There is no one example of a woman, so the idea of a single female gaze is inherently flawed. Much like the male gaze can only be representative of the audience studied – predominantly white, upper-class, heterosexual men – the female gaze explored is representative of a small majority.

The process of film analysis is essentially the same as literary analysis. It entails analyzing the language of the film. Film analysis is different from literary analysis however due to the visual nature of the film. In order to understand a film holistically, the script and the visual rhetoric must be studied in tandem. This entails an awareness of the structure and pacing of the film, analysis of props, clothing, and the mise-en-scene, salience, and focus of the scenes.

The structure of a film often follows set patterns, or commonalities that when broken the audience becomes highly aware of the difference. Many films follow the plot pyramid with an introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Movies and TV shows often tweak this format to show scenes out-of-order or by starting *en media res* but films most often follow this structure. The pacing is how fast or slow a film follows this path. It entails an awareness of how long is spent on each facet of the plot as well.

A lot of the visual awareness of a film involves props and clothing. Every single object in a film is placed on screen for some reason; either to establish an understanding of the place, for characterization or even for brand deals. Regardless, props are deliberate and clothing and costuming are as well. In order to understand the intent of the production company the purpose of the clothing and props should be fully explored.

Mise-en-scene refers to what the production team included in the scene and what is left out of the scene. The focus on mise-en-scene should question why the specific scene is depicted

the way it is and why the production team is deliberately leaving things out. It questions what effect these choices have on the film itself. Saliency is what is placed at the front and center of the screen and what level of importance this choice entails. If one character is positioned closer to the camera, this often denotes a larger emphasis on that specific character, similarly, if a character is physically higher up on the screen it also emphasizes them.

Perhaps the most important aspect of film analysis in producing the male and female gaze is camera focus. The way the camera is angled and focused determines how viewers interact with a film. Point-of-view, over-the-shoulder, and close-up shots create a closer, more intense visual, while wide and long shots imply distance. Different camera angles and shots position the viewer differently within a film and directly relate to the audience's engagement and reaction to a film. With angles and positioning production teams quite literally manipulate the image that viewers are presented with, so to analyze a film the viewer must question why the film was manipulated in the way it was.

No analysis of the female gaze can begin without a thorough examination of Laura Mulvey's *Visual and Other Pleasures*. In this text, Mulvey explores the male gaze in exhaustive detail and codifies it as a continuing form of visual film analysis. The premise of the male gaze as Mulvey defines it is that there is one gaze, the male gaze, which is something that men tend to enjoy and experience when watching a film.

In her later article, "Afterthoughts," Mulvey controversially claims that women have a kind of transgender approach to movies and are required to occupy a male gaze position as well because every movie is made with the assumption that the audience is male. This comes down to Freudian philosophy that claims femininity is simply non-masculinity. This is problematic

because it assumes women are the opposite of men with no similarities and implies that women only exist as a juxtaposition of a man.

In her initial essay describing the male gaze titled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey analyzes the male gaze through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis. Mulvey’s analysis is strictly focused on cinema in her essay, but in the years since, her work has been applied to literature as well. Mulvey wrote her seminal piece *Visual and Other Pleasures* in an analysis of early Hollywood cinema. She uses Freud to showcase the “pre-existing patterns of fascination” within a person that makes their way onto the screen (14). These “pre-existing patterns” are the ways young boys' minds develop. In her article, Mulvey uses Freud to claim that film is designed to satisfy the male psyche. Mulvey claims that these patterns control the images, the act of looking, and the formation of spectacle in a movie. At its core, Mulvey’s argument is that the patriarchy—or a society and culture that benefits men—shapes media and our perception of media is shaped by Freud’s theories of psychoanalysis.

Mulvey is particularly focused on what this shaping does to the images of women in film. To examine the images, she uses Freud’s concepts of castration anxiety—the fear that men feel when seeing a woman without a penis—to discuss the overt othering in feminine depictions. To satisfy castration anxiety, according to Freud, men must dominate women and Mulvey argues that this continues in movies and culminates in the “silent image of the woman” (15). Mulvey’s primary argument that patriarchal culture determines and impacts cinema is proven within her work, but her Freudian analysis ensures that the inherent misogynistic connotations in Freud’s work underscore her arguments. Many feminist scholars simply focus on the social aspect of Mulvey’s essay. Specifically, they tend to agree that the male gaze is formed when men dominate the movie industry. This allows a man to be involved in every single aspect of production leaving

no room for input from women. Movies are created, produced, and seen by men and the story itself is centered around the male character. According to Mulvey, this means that male audience members can enjoy the sexual and physical domination of women on screen.

This domination and the power dynamic it creates is something Mulvey discusses at length. She discusses the “scopophilic pleasure”—or a pleasure in looking—a man gets from watching and she claims men self-insert into the dominant male character giving them power over the female object in the film. Her analysis focuses on the power dynamics on screen, the design of the movie by men for men, and the objectification of the woman on screen. Mulvey claims that the men in the audience get scopophilic pleasure not only from gratuitous imagery of women but also from a narcissistic connection with the male protagonist. Even as women in film are objectified and sexualized, the men are idealized so when the audience identifies with the character, they have *become* the perfect man. This idealized identification requires separation for the audience – it must be impossible for the audience to identify with the female image. Because the female image is dominated and objectified, Mulvey claims that there must be separation to ensure men feel pleasure from the film.

To ensure this separation, women are objectified and depersonalized on screen. A typical female character is nothing short of a caricature. She is a passive creature with no discernable personality. Mulvey argues that the woman is placed in “a traditional exhibitionist role” which creates a “to-be-looked-at-ness” (19). The woman’s entire purpose and construction is for the male character’s—and by extension the audience’s—pleasure. In fact, this aspect is so important that Mulvey claims that the sexualization interrupts the flow of the story. The plot is literally paused to slow-pan up a woman’s body and the action is halted to appreciate the female form.

Perhaps most importantly, the male gaze must *not* eroticize men. Male characters are depicted as perfect and are aesthetically idealized, but to be eroticized would mean homosexual undertones that Mulvey argues the male gaze avoids at all costs. She claims that movies often avoid the “problem” of women entirely and create a “buddy movie” that showcases male friendship but carefully stays away from eroticization (29).

Laura Mulvey’s argument about the male gaze is wildly complex and filled with intricate reasoning. When these threads of logic are pulled, however, they often lead to Freudian opinions on femininity. Freud was notoriously sexist and misogynistic and his understanding of femininity is simply the lack of masculinity. Thus, feminist critics often accept that the patriarchy affects film without subscribing to the belief that the patriarchy’s components are based on castration anxiety. Mulvey’s argument is centered around an entirely male, heterosexual, and rather privileged audience and leaves no room for more diverse identities. This remains the most critiqued aspect of her argument.

In her essay published in 1973, Laura Mulvey theorized the existence of the male gaze in Hollywood cinema. Since that point, feminist critics have wondered about the women in the audience, why her argument is so male-centered, and the concept of the female gaze that arises from this work. Theoretically, if the male gaze is flipped it should become the female gaze. Many critics however find this lacking in several aspects.

Mulvey’s argument can be distilled into five different characteristics of the male gaze. For each of these characteristics, I will flip them along the gender line—simply replacing male with female and vice versa—and discuss the problems that arise. These characteristics are that the male gaze objectifies women, separates male viewers from the female object, allows

identification of the male viewers with the protagonist, creates a woman solely for male pleasure which interrupts the story, and does not eroticize men.

Mulvey spends a lot of time discussing the objectification of women in the male gaze. She relates this to Freud's theory of scopophilia and claims that this scopophilia takes "other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (16). At its core, this means that the gazes of the men in production, in the audience, and in the film itself create an objectifying gaze. If this concept were flipped, this would mean that the female gaze objectifies men. True objectification of a male character is not present in the female gaze, however. To claim this would mean denying centuries of systematic objectification of women. This power and cultural domination is what got transferred onto the screen, thus claiming that the female gaze is simply an objectification of men is rather short-sighted.

Essential to the male gaze is the concept that the male audience does not identify with the female character. Mulvey argues that this allows the male viewers to experience power over the woman—thus satisfying their castration anxiety—and removing them from associating with the powerless. In feminine terms, this would mean that the female audience does not identify with the male character. The character that the audience identifies with is entirely subjective and related to personal experience. Current media typically refrains from having a single relatable vantage point. This identification is based solely on the viewers and not inherent within the film, making this an incorrect assumption of the female gaze and a facet that could not possibly apply to the sheer volume of media in the world.

If in the male gaze the male audience does not identify with the female character, this means that they identify with the male character. Mulvey focuses in this portion on Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror gaze in which the child sees their reflection and for the first time

associates it with the concept of me. This version of the child is a “more complete, more perfect” image than they experience in their own self (17). Mulvey argues that this is a similar experience for men identifying with the protagonist on-screen. It is not that the male is fallible and human but that the men in the audience can identify themselves with the perfect man on screen. When flipped, this would mean that women would identify with the more perfect version of themselves in the female protagonist. This does not however align with the current cinematic world. In fact, the flaws of characters are often one of the main facets of the storyline. Furthermore, as stated previously, identification is highly subjective, especially with the more diverse audiences in modern times. This also falls short in analysis.

Moving into the eroticization of the characters in the film, Mulvey argues that the women on screen are eroticized to the point that it interrupts the plot and story flow. She claims these instances tend “to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (19). If the gender roles were reversed, the men would be eroticized in moments that suspend the plot and flow of time. In reality, however, this is not the case. In films where men are eroticized and viewed as desirable, this is often an aspect of the film that is vital to the plot. For many feminist critics, this structure is exactly what the female gaze breaks down.

Finally, the core of Mulvey’s theory is that the male protagonist is never eroticized. This leaves out any homoerotic uncertainty and discomfort for male viewers. As stated previously, we know that this is no longer the case. Male bodies are now commonly eroticized in film. If we flip this, it would mean women’s bodies are never eroticized. This is far from the truth. Women’s bodies have been and always will be eroticized, so this theory does not hold up to scrutiny.

Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze may have worked in the 1970s to describe Hollywood cinema, but in modern times it falls short of describing the female gaze. A lot of Mulvey’s theory

is hinged on Freud's theory of masculinity and femininity. In her afterword, published in 1981 Mulvey even mentions that femininity is repressed masculinity. Mulvey's idea of femininity is that it cannot exist unless it is in comparison or in opposition to masculinity. Her theory is surrounded by misogynistic undertones that claim the female gaze *cannot* exist. Thus, a mere reversal of the male gaze is not sufficient enough to describe a female gaze.

The phrase "female gaze" is used ubiquitously in feminist scholarship, in cinematic analysis, and in pop culture, but very few sources actually develop a definition for it. These definitions are widely varied and often do not hold up to scrutiny. I will analyze sixteen different definitions that come from the analysis of novels, action movies, TV shows, romance movies, and music videos. This range of formats will help create a definition that is applicable to more than one genre or structure.

Two critics argue that the female gaze does not actually exist, but that the male gaze is upheld by patriarchal culture making the female gaze unable to exist. Caetlin Benson-Allot argues that the label "female gaze" implies "a universal experience based on shared gender characteristics" (69). She claims that without a fully intersectional awareness of femininity, there cannot be a female gaze. Since Mulvey published *Visual and Other Pleasures*, feminist critics have noticed that the focus is entirely on a white, middle-class, heterosexual man and it remains one of the biggest knots in the effort to define the female gaze. There is no one definition of a woman, and thus there cannot be one monolithic female gaze. There can however be the female gaze that changes with genre and format because of the way media appeals to a target audience.

Likewise, Katy Stewart argues that there cannot be a female gaze in the traditional cinematic form due to the masculine nature of production and plot. For Stewart, because of the male-dominated field, to even step outside of the male gaze a movie would need to overthrow

classic cinematic form, depict men as incompetent, and take place in mostly feminine or domestic spaces. Stewart claims that there “is not yet a fully-formed, distinctly female gaze in cinema” but does believe that there have been efforts leading toward a female gaze (217). The idea of the format of cinema being geared toward a masculine audience is a very important facet of the female gaze that I define. In order to break out of the male-dominated cinematic world, there needs to be something structurally that is distinctive to the female gaze, but I do not believe there has to be a point where the male characters are usurped. This seems like a flip of power dynamics rather than a destruction or equalizing power structure.

Jessica Taylor also focuses on power dynamics in her analysis of *The Twilight Saga*. She believes that the female gaze entails a *to-be-looked-at-ness* for men in the movies, but that this can only happen with young boys. Taylor claims that “the possibility of a female gaze rests upon the presence of a “boy” and only lasts until the boy reaches adulthood and gains “the much more potent power of the male gaze” (398). This is odd for several reasons, only one being the reference to the objects of female desire in the movies as “boys.” Ignoring the almost pedophilic idea that a woman can only desire a young boy until he reaches adulthood and desires her, this also implies that the male gaze is more powerful than the female gaze.

In a review of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), Veronica Esposito argues that the definition of the female gaze boils down to two women looking at each other. She argues that the male gaze is dismantled and the female gaze follows the characters as they “begin to comprehend how to see themselves and each other” (20). It is through their uniquely and solely female gaze that they discover themselves and the object of their gaze. This links the female gaze far more to internal identity and characterization rather than to physical appearance and eroticism. This argument does not go far enough in its definition of the female gaze. If the male

gaze can be distilled into five different categories, simply making the female gaze have a single requirement is not logical. For the female gaze to be the counterpart or even the resistance to the male gaze, Esposito is missing a portion of the definition. That being said, Esposito's focus on characterization rather than aesthetics is fascinating and while I believe that the female gaze does focus on characterization, I believe it simultaneously focuses on appearances and eroticism as well.

Anja Hirdman discusses the Harlequin romance novel as a home for the female gaze in literature. She claims that through corporeal sensations, double-narrator perspectives, and the desire to know the object of the gaze rather than see them the female gaze dominates this genre. The corporeal sensations that Hirdman focuses on are nonverbal and often impossible to hide bodily clues that show a person's feelings for another. She argues that this combined with an understanding of both characters' perspectives within the story, and the driving force behind the plot being the desire to learn the object of desire completely overthrows the male gaze and creates a female gaze. Hirdman claims however that it can only exist "in a textual form" (61). I believe that Hirdman ignores the structural ingredients that form the female gaze, specifically as seen in Stewart's argument, and that the female gaze can absolutely exist in visual form. A movie or TV show is only limited by the actors and director's ability to portray what a book writes.

Athena Bellas actually explores the benefits of a television series to create a female gaze, especially one designed for streaming. She argues that this visual format allows viewers to connect more deeply and viscerally to the characters and the sensations on screen. Bellas suggests as well that in the female gaze the audience becomes the characters, experiencing the feelings and sensations that the characters are experiencing. The problem here is that identification and feel are subjective and change from person to person. Streaming multiple

episodes over a period of time I think does allow for a more visceral experience especially as it pertains to the strength of attachment to the characters and the world.

For Paula Marantz Cohen, there has to be a focal female character in the movie for the female gaze to be present. She claims you can tell that the woman has the power and draws the eyes because of the show-stopping clothes she is wearing. She claims that the female gaze engages “with material things” as an extension of the characters and that the focus on material objects and clothing is how to appeal to the female gaze (79). Her format disrupts the masculine linear flow of time and makes the plot secondary to spectacle. The focus is on dialogue rather than action. The idea of time being upset and a focus on the middle moments rather than the end goal in a plot is an interesting thread if followed. The way Cohen words this however implies that the female gaze only appears to women because they are shallow. At its core, the argument Cohen is making is that women value material objects like clothing, jewelry, and a well-decorated house. She also claims that women value words over action. Each of these is a misogynistic ideal connected to the idea of a woman’s place being the home and remaining mostly stationary throughout the day. Not to mention that the idea that every woman values words and objects is a massive stereotype.

Zoe Dirse discusses what happens to the male gaze if there is no male in the film. Dirse focuses on documentaries that film women, but what she explores is that there were no men in production at all. She argues that when the male gaze is subverted like this, “we finally have an opportunity to view ourselves as we really are” (21). Essentially, Dirse claims that to have a female gaze women must be involved in every aspect of the film, from directing, producing, acting, etc. This is widely essentialist and implies that men can never understand women. It

separates men and women but at the female gaze's core, I believe it is about *trying* to understand, rather than denying the possibility.

John Phillips agrees with the perspective aspect of Dirse. He claims that the female gaze must be made up of the female character's point of view. In his analysis, Phillips claims that the gaze either represents the female director or the protagonist. He also handles the eroticization of the female body, which many critics avoid. He claims that although the screen is fetishizing, it focuses on the whole body and character rather than just one body part. He does focus on “the difficulties involved in the successful modeling of a female gaze” making his paper mostly focused on the problems (1). I believe that a female gaze should have both of these aspects but that we are still missing something.

Anna Brech actually is writing about *Bridgerton* when she claims that the female gaze must be written by a woman who is making deliberate choices to show female agency. She takes an essentialist viewpoint that argues only women can create the female gaze which is inherently flawed. She also claims that it is impossible to talk about the female gaze without talking about sex and power. Thus, to Brech, a vital aspect of the gaze is to remember the power structures and constrained choices placed upon women. While I believe that this does play a part in the female gaze, Brech does not discuss the way this actually changes on the screen and focuses on intention in creation. I believe she needs to push this further.

In her analysis of *Thelma & Louise*, Brenda Cooper argues that the female gaze must mock the male gaze and showcase women-centered themes. She also believes that there needs to be a lot of screen time dedicated to female friendship and a focus on female activity rather than sexuality. Cooper claims that there has to be a “tension between female and male gazes” because

the female gaze can never completely overthrow the male gaze (298). She believes that if both the gazes in a film exist they must inherently be at odds with each other.

Alyse Keller and Katie L. Gibson likewise agree that the female gaze must inherently be placed in opposition to the male gaze. This argument essentially claims that the female gaze or femininity cannot exist unless it contrasts or opposes the male gaze or masculinity. This is an inherently misogynistic idea that believes women are the counterpart or complementary to the standard male. These critics also argue that the only place for the female gaze is in an action film, negating any woman who is not physically active and strong.

Cordelia Freeman focuses on music videos rather than films which means she focuses a lot on the *queering* of the structure. She argues that pop culture is the perfect space for contesting powers and that especially music videos break down the normal audience-creator binary (1008). This means Mulvey's entire theory crumbles and leaves behind a specifically "non-monolithic" female gaze (1027). The structural focus here is essential in the creation of the female gaze because when the normative structure is disrupted it leaves room for more exploration of the female gaze.

Orsolya Szujer focuses on the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* and on the way the male body is eroticized within. She focuses entirely on the voyeuristic and erotic imagery within the films rather than structural or thematic questions, which creates a female gaze that *only* eroticizes men. Szujer's work ignores the power dynamics that Mulvey claims are so essential to the male gaze and essentially claims that the female gaze is just the male gaze that eroticizes men instead of women. Szujer does note, however, that "the female gaze tends to be kinder than its male counterpart" because it does not strip the eroticized body of its agency (5). This is something I believe is essential to the female gaze.

Jaime Bihlmeyer claims that the “female gaze is the trace of FEMININITY that lies behind the female voice” (5). For Bihlmeyer, there is an essential characteristic given to women that determines the female gaze. This is inherently problematic and refuses access to the female gaze to anyone not born with the femininity that Bihlmeyer believes exists. This essentialist thinking has been proven wrong by feminist scholars for years. This source also gives no definition about the “trace of femininity” vital to the formation of the female gaze which leaves a total lack of real definition of the female gaze.

To accurately define the female gaze, a holistic understanding of the male gaze is vital. Not only should the characteristics be focused on—the formation of the male gaze itself must be considered. The male gaze is rather straightforward, but this is because the culture at the time of Mulvey’s analysis was deceptively straightforward. In Mulvey’s time, there was nowhere near the same queer awareness and identity level. In the 1980s there was a vague acknowledgment of the LGBTQ+ community but they were in no way involved in movie production, nor were they the primary concern in Mulvey’s analysis. Her time was the birth of feminist and queer movements and the culmination of which makes the same straightforward analysis difficult in 2023.

Instead of focusing on a single, monolithic female gaze, we must then account for the multiplicity of female identities, experiences, and desires. This will inherently create a fluid, changing gaze that morphs based on the target audience, genre, and format. This could explain why a cohesive definition has been so difficult to come by. The specific gaze showcased in *Bridgerton* is targeted toward an audience with heterosexual desire (although there is room for queer desire), with ample time to watch television, and with enough income to have a Netflix subscription.

Furthermore, the format of a streaming television series is more suited to developing the female gaze than a movie in a theater or a serial released week by week. There is far less censorship for Netflix than for cable television and a more diverse group is involved in publication. Streaming as a format also allows the audience to watch the series privately, often in bed or on their couch at home and allows for binge-watching. This all creates a much more personal and more encompassing world in the series. This contributes to the sense that the viewer personally knows the characters rather than creating any separation.

Much like my summary of the male gaze, I can distill my definition of the female gaze into five separate characteristics. First, the female gaze must showcase desire and sexuality for a multiplicity of identities in the audience. Second, there must be an element of individuation. Rather than placing characters on a pedestal, special attention is paid to flaws and idiosyncrasies which creates an accurate representation rather than a caricature. Third, the erotic visual portions of the film do not interrupt time and plot because the plot is entirely entwined in these moments. This is not to say that plot is nonexistent but simply that more time is spent in these moments of suspended tension than on the driving force of the plot. Characters are not reaching for the end goal but rather for these moments of eroticization and romance. Fourth, the focus of characterization is not on physical characteristics but on inner characteristics. The character is not desirable because they are pretty or sexy but rather because of their personalities. Finally, the female gaze creates a place for the audience as a third participant in the show rather than as an interloper. This is created through the actual gaze of the camera which closes off the separation vital for the formation of Mulvey's male gaze.

At the very core of the male gaze is the fact that films made in the male gaze appeal to male desire and sexuality. Therefore, the female gaze should also appeal to female desire and

sexuality. There is not one way that women feel desire however so there must be multiple characters eroticized within the film. Men and women are equally eroticized on screen and there is room for the audience to desire a litany of characters. This does not mean that there is a one-to-one ratio of male and female nudity on screen, however. When a woman is nude on screen, there is historic and cultural baggage that then objectifies her. The same can not be said of men. It is possible to objectify men but this is avoided by only eroticizing men in positions of autonomy. They do not connote a *to-be-looked-at-ness*.

Much like desire, identification and relating to characters is inherently specific to the audience member. There is no way to create a universal self-insert for all audience members so the female gaze avoids this entirely. A necessary element of this characteristic of the female gaze is that there are multiple fully-fledged characters to relate to. By humanizing multiple characters, it is far more likely that audience members can relate to one of the several three-dimensional characters. The female gaze must showcase fully-fledged characters to avoid objectification and to create depictions of multiple identities on screen.

When women are depicted in an eroticized manner in the female gaze they are also not objectified. Just like men, they are not shown in the object position but rather as a subject. When a woman is nude on screen she is always *doing* something. She is not waltzing around naked in a manner that suspends the plot, but she is actively existing within the plot. This makes the female gaze empowering without denigrating men—both genders and bodies are equally desirable and eroticized. This is shown by equitable screen time and eroticized moments.

Another way that films can avoid objectification is by ensuring that we do not objectify the main characters without first knowing them. There may be gratuitous imagery of background characters but before eroticizing the subjects of desire, we are introduced and their characters are

established—then there is sexual imagery. The goal is to understand and focus on these characters as people rather than as bodies with sexual connotations. This does not uplift any single perspective and creates an equitable understanding of the characters.

The second characteristic of the female gaze is that special attention is paid to the personality flaws and idiosyncrasies of the characters. They are not perfect, and this is emphasized. This means that the identification of the audience is not wishing that they were the perfect version of themselves they see in the film, but rather places the audience on the same playing field. This makes the watching experience more visceral and real for the audience. If the characters could reasonably be met in the real world, or if the audience can see themselves in that position it makes the action and the desire showcased far more realistic.

While both the male and female gaze contain the erotic, the erotic does not interrupt time and plot in the female gaze. In the male gaze cameras linger on the female form, illustrated best in the slow pan from a woman's feet, up through her legs and torso, and then eventually settling on her face. Viewers see this woman first as a faceless body (one that is usually sexually attractive), and only at the end of this slow pan that breaks all narrative elements do they see her as the possessor of personhood. But in the female gaze, the erotic is essential to, and drives the plot. It is not the whole plot but sex scenes and gratuitous imagery have a pertinent reason for appearing when they do. In simple terms, if you took the sex scenes and imagery out of the film, you would miss vital plot points.

There are multiple narrative changes in the female gaze relating to characterization and language, but perhaps the most important change is that the plot is not linear. Special attention is paid to the moments of desire and tension. Far more screen time is allocated to these moments than anything related to plot movement, which is why the plot is often tangled up in these

moments. The middle moments, containing the development of erotic tension between characters, is far more important than their goal or the end. The buildup of tension between two characters, vacillating between concern, disregard, love, and desire, is emphasized far more than their successful union at the end.

One other distinction between the gazes is that the female gaze focuses on physical touches and body language rather than words. In order to fully understand a character, the audience must decode these physical clues, because they reveal a character's inner feelings. Characters are often willfully hiding or ignoring things that their bodily reactions reveal. Often, because of the format of the story, the audience will experience some form of dramatic irony. They will understand why a character acts the way they do, but other characters labor under a misapprehension of the character's true nature. This misreading, and its eventual resolution is a significant driver of the plot. In fact, physical reactions, quirks, and nuances inadvertently reveal the emotions that a character is trying to either hide or repress.

The romance genre as a whole is uniquely situated to the creation of the female gaze. It has a long history of appealing to women and being written by women. This started with Jane Austen in the 1800s and has continued into the modern day. The typical romance novel is concerned with the development of relationships between characters, so the plot becomes secondary. These novels often switch perspectives, with chapters presented from the point of view of multiple characters. This means that a reader has a front-row seat for exactly what that character's actions mean, and how those actions relate to their lives. This format offers a window into the character's true self, and means that there is no possible way to avoid a holistic understanding of their motives and emotions.

The final characteristic of the female gaze is created through the lens and focus of the cameras. With over-the-shoulder shots, direct perspective, and close-up shots during erotic moments, the audience becomes an active third participant in the scene. The separation that is so vital to Mulvey's male gaze is completely destroyed in the female gaze. This gaze creates a space for viewers to experience their own desires within the confines of the story. It creates room for the viewer to become an active participant in the story, complete with their own visceral reactions.

In December of 2020, *Bridgerton* was released as a full season on Netflix. The first season contains eight episodes which follow a sensual love story between Simon Basset the Duke of Hastings and Daphne Bridgerton, eldest daughter of the late Viscount Bridgerton. The story mostly follows their relationship and their changing dynamic, but there is extensive time spent focusing the mysterious identity of Lady Whistledown and other societal drama. Within a couple of weeks of *Bridgerton*'s release, the series skyrocketed to fame producing massive levels of social media conversation and media speculation about the series. One common theme within these reviews is the phrase the female gaze. It seems that everyone is in agreement that the female gaze exists, that *Bridgerton* develops it, and that it is somehow connected to the attractive Duke of Hastings, but none agree or even define the female gaze. In order to fill in the scholarly gaps in this conversation, I am going to apply my definition to *Bridgerton*.

Bridgerton takes place in London in 1813, although there are historical inaccuracies in place the series seems to occupy a kind of magical fantasy world that blends history with fiction. The plot mostly revolves around the Bridgerton family who has lost their father in the past. Daphne is at the age when eligible ladies of the ton are presented to Queen Charlotte and participate in their first "season" in order to find a husband. Simon Basset is returning to town to

live with his aunt, Lady Danbury, after his father's death left him the Dukedom. Of course, Daphne and Simon hate each other at first meeting and never intend to marry. Instead of discussing the episodes in a linear fashion, I will follow the five characteristics of the female gaze and use supplementary scenes from the episodes to furnish my analysis.

Part of the reason for *Bridgerton's* immense popularity is connected to the appeal it has for a wide audience. With the development of several fully fledged characters, there is ample room for people of different identities to desire and explore sexuality within the series. Episode 1 opens with introductions of characters and an immediate sex scene depicting Anthony and Siena against a tree. These characters are situated as sexually desirable and as active participants in sexual agency at their first introduction. The gratuitous imagery continues and is applied to several characters. Throughout the series, Anthony Bridgerton, Benedict Bridgerton, Will Mondrich, and Simon Basset are periodically eroticized. Further, Daphne Bridgerton, Marina Thompson, Siena, and Madame Delacroix are all eroticized as well. Finally, there are depictions of polyamorous and queer relationships in the steamy sex scene at the artist party Benedict went to. This range of characters are from numerous identities and social standings, leaving ample room for personal audience desire to have a home in the series.

This eroticization does not follow societal conventions that define *sexy*. Some of the most heightened moments of sexual tension in the series leave men more nude than women which is traditionally the opposite in film. On screen, Anthony has a lot of nude time, while Siena is typically covered by carefully draped sheets. From a plot standpoint, every time we see a man naked, it is because of what is happening. This is not the case for women, there is no scenario in the series in which it would make sense for a woman to be showing more skin—especially in a mildly historic series. Furthermore, because of societal baggage and the proliferation of the

patriarchy, a naked woman is inherently objectified by our culture in a way that male bodies have never been. Thus, the nudity on the part of women is scarce and focused on the possibility of nudity rather than the reality.

For all of the eroticization and desire depicted in *Bridgerton*, not a single character is morally perfect or innocent of human fault. Anthony and Siena have a lot of time on-screen for background characters and a lot of that time is spent on the ways they are taking advantage of each other. Their relationship is mutually beneficial and, at a certain level, completely economic in its nature. Anthony uses Siena as a sexual outlet or even as a rebellion against his role as Viscount while Siena uses Anthony for his money and comfort he can provide her. Anthony and Siena or one of many characters whose faults are emphasized in the series as well. Not a single character is without these faults; the background men in the first episode follow Simon's and Anthony's expressions of desire like sheep, Cressida Cowper is shallow, and even the Queen does not communicate with her husband. Even the main character's Daphne and Simon are subject to this humanization.

In Episode 2, the audience learns that Simon has daddy issues, to put it in contemporary terms. His fraught relationship with his father is explored, and shows why he is closed off and dramatic now. His lack of communication and inability to face conflict without violence are highlighted again and again, yet despite these he remains desirable throughout the series. The same happens with Daphne. She treats Eloise terribly because Eloise does not share the same aspirations as her, and the two butt heads throughout the series. Daphne manipulates gossip, uses the Prince to make Simon jealous, and even outright rapes Simon. Like the Duke, Daphne is a flawed character who is nevertheless desirable. The effect of this presentation is that the

characters are all humanized, and thus become more real. They are not unrealistic paragons of virtue, but imperfect, relatable, and human.

Bridgerton is full of steamy sex scenes and suspended tension, but none of these moments interrupt the plot and time laid out in the series. While the plot follows Daphne and Simon's relationship, the moments that eroticize Daphne or Simon do not interrupt this. Nor do they seem out of place in the narrative arc of the series and its plot development. In Episode 1, we see sexual acts only from Siena and Anthony; these serve to demonstrate why Anthony is distracted and shirking his duties toward Daphne, which creates the main conflict in much of the first season. There are scenes in which Will Mondrich and Simon Basset are shirtless but this is only while boxing and neither of these shots linger or use Daphne's gaze on either man. Episodes 2 and 3 exist primarily to build tension between the characters. In the second episode especially, the dancing and interaction between Daphne and Simon is platonic and nonsexual, at this point they are friends. Episode 3 is characterized by Daphne's exploration of her desire and sexuality, this is the first moment Daphne herself is eroticized on screen and it is in relation to her heightened awareness of the Duke and her development as a woman with a healthy sexuality.

Episode 5 is the point where the series shifts from anticipation to consistent on-screen sex from the main characters. This is only after the characters are married and even when showing several sexual encounters between them, the show's plot could not be followed without these scenes. None interrupt the plot because the scenes are so integral to the development of the plot. For example, in episode 6, the Duke's childhood trauma and subsequent lack of desire for children is revealed to Daphne and she controversially confronts Simon during sex. Without watching this scene the couple would transform from happy newlyweds into terse ignorance of

each other on a dime. Likewise, there is no real instance where the couple talks through their issues, instead they make up through physicality.

Although *Bridgerton* spends ample screen time on eroticization and projecting desire onto the characters, it also ensures that the people on screen are characterized internally rather than externally. This means that rather than beauty or ability, characters are personalized by internal characteristics. They are desirable because of what the main character (and by proxy the audience) learns about them, not because of how they look. *Bridgerton* establishes this in multiple ways, but much of it is connected to how much time characters spend not being sexualized or not participating in sexual activities. Daphne spends the first three episodes almost completely covered and she primarily spends time with her family rather than with the Duke. This highlights how important family is to her character, something that only marginally relates to her sex life with Simon later. Likewise, Simon spends time with his friends, Will and Anthony which highlights his values including loyalty and chosen family rather than blood. Although this changes as the main characters' dynamics with one another shifts, the time spent with friends and family does not consist of talking about each other.

In Episode 5, Simon is asked to prove his love to the Queen in their appeal for a special marriage license. In this scene, Simon says that "Romance was entirely out of the question for both of us. But in so removing it, we found something far greater: we found friendship" and continues to emphasize that he loves Daphne because she is his best friend ("The Duke and I" 30:28). This highlights just how important the development of the characters outside of their attraction and desire for each other is in the series and continues long after they are married in the series. The last three episodes of season 1 constitute the couple learning more about each other and how they live. Daphne learns that Simon cherishes the people that live in the village on

his property and about his childhood and Simon learns that Daphne enjoys communicating directly with staff and the people in the village. These are all important characteristics that continue to develop and shift the dynamic of the characters throughout the season.

One of the most unique aspects of *Bridgerton* as a TV series is the format change that shifts the audience from an observer to an active participant in the screen. Part of this is connected to the realness of the characters—the audience can see the characters as real people rather than depictions of people because of how deeply they are characterized. But a lot of this is developed through the structure of the series. Firstly, the development of a TV show for streaming is very different from the development of the show for broadcasting. Before Netflix rose to popularity, TV shows were watched on a weekly schedule and were heavily censored by broadcasting companies. Now, series are published seasons at a time which has led to bingeing the series, often watching all of the episodes in the span of a day. This new format also means that censorship has dropped significantly. With the ability to filter children and adult movies on the audience's side, the need for child-friendly only television has decreased dramatically.

This lack of censorship means that shows like *Bridgerton* can place desire and sexuality at the forefront of the series and expand upon the development of it much easier. Likewise, the reality of streaming a show in private, in your own home creates a far more personal and immersive experience than any movie theater or television in the living room could before. *Bridgerton* masterfully pairs this distinction with shots that directly contribute to the audience's immersion. Episode 1 is filled with point of view (POV) shots, and angles that follow often right next to people as they are moving from one place to another. This creates an illusion that if the audience is not *the* character on-screen they are at least walking with them. This is continued throughout the series with over the shoulder shots and close up shots as well, especially when the

characters are in one-on-one discussions with each other. All of this leads to a more visceral viewing experience.

Although *Bridgerton* does a fantastic job showcasing female desire and sexuality and forefronting women's issues in the story, the show does have several drawbacks. Many critics have spoken out against the way race is portrayed in the series. In episode 4, Lady Danbury chastises Simon by reminding him that the only reason that black people have risen to power in this universe is that the white king was gracious enough to fall in love with a black woman. This raises a lot of concerns, not the least of which is that the show is trying to erase centuries of slavery and colonialism. It also raises concerns that *Bridgerton* is capitalizing off of black bodies without actually doing any work to make an accurate representation of people of color.

The series has also been criticized for the depiction of rape in episode 6. Daphne clearly continues to have sex after Simon says "Wait" in her quest for a child, yet the show treats this as a minor lapse in judgment. Not a single person blames Daphne in this circumstance and it is brushed off as soon as the couple makes up. This is in stark contrast to the way Berbrooke is treated after trying to assault Daphne. The distinction here is either that Daphne is a woman, and thus not as threatening, or that she is white and has power over Simon. Either way, the scene is messy and out-of-place in the seemingly progressive show.

For all of the things that *Bridgerton* does really well, it cannot be labeled as a feminist piece of literature. This does not however discount that the show uplifts the female gaze. The series should not be idolized—but rather it should be seen as the first step in the right direction. Although I fully believe that *Bridgerton* is a wonderful example of the female gaze in popular culture, I am aware of its many faults and I am not overlooking them.

Laura Mulvey revolutionized the cinematic world with her works on the male gaze, but it is time for women to finally be included in the criticism. It has been exactly 50 years since she published “Visual and Other Pleasures” and film analysis is still ambivalent toward a true definition of the female gaze

With more and more inclusivity and diversity within film production and scholarship, the time has come for this analysis. As the world continues to become more globalized, many perspectives are expressed in popular culture which has inherently led to a shift in dynamics since the 70s. Mulvey’s analysis of the male gaze was truly revolutionary and still vital to understanding film production to this day, but the female gaze is just as important.

The female gaze is not simply the male gaze with women, it is not objectifying men, and it is not only generated by women in production. The female gaze is developed when a film uplifts women’s desire and sexuality to the forefront of the plot. It is characterized by a far more humanizing sexualization than the male gaze and is inherently inclusive and fluid. *Bridgerton* has undoubtedly begun the work for a truly inclusive television series, but I hope that more shows follow this path and the female gaze becomes as prolific as the male gaze in film theory.

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