

Preserving Female Agency in the Gaze: An Analysis of *The Silence of the Lambs*

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Abstract

Laura Mulvey's essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," published in 1975, has become a foundational text in cinema and feminist criticism. Mulvey introduces the concept of the "male gaze," arguing that traditional Hollywood cinema is constructed from a patriarchal perspective that objectifies women. This camera gaze influences the portrayal of female characters and affects how audiences engage with narratives. Mulvey employs concepts from psychoanalysis, particularly from Freud and Lacan, to explain how films generate visual pleasure through identification and desire. She discusses how viewers, especially male viewers, derive pleasure from the visual representation of women, reinforcing patriarchal structures within narrative cinema.

Keywords: *The Silence of the Lambs*, Mulvey's theory, male gaze, identification and desire

1. Introduction

Considering Mulvey's theory, as well as the film's utilization of symbolism and cinematography, this essay will discuss how *The Silence of the Lambs* 1991 portrays the female protagonist Clarice Starling whilst the limitation of Mulvey's theory.

The Silence of the Lambs, directed by Jonathan Demme and produced by Orion Pictures, was released in 1991. This psychological thriller follows FBI trainee Clarice Starling as she seeks the help of imprisoned cannibalistic serial killer Dr. Hannibal Lecter to catch another murderer. The film is significant not only for its gripping narrative and chilling performances but also for its exploration of complex themes such as power dynamics and identity. It became one of the few

films to win the "big five" Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress, and Best Adapted Screenplay (Los Angeles Times, 2013). Most significantly, the film's portrayal of a strong female character in a male-dominated landscape has sparked discussions about gender representation in cinema. By examining the film beyond its suspense elements, audiences can observe how issues such as sexual objectification and the male gaze dominate the protagonist's journey.

2. Symbolism

Throughout the movie, symbolism plays a crucial role in the portrayal of Clarice. The camera highlights significant symbolic moments that emphasize her intelligence and strength.

For instance, the camera lingers on a drawing by

Hannibal for a few seconds, depicting Clarice as a female deity holding a lamb, resembling the

image of Jesus holding a lamb.



There is strong evidence supporting her image as a female deity just before the painting appearing.



A male policeman first asks Starling if Hannibal is akin to a vampire. Superstition often symbolizes fear. However, Starling neither mocks nor dismisses his fear. Instead, her

response is quietly reassuring; she avoids mentioning vampires and says, "They don't have a name for what he is."

Another compelling illustration of her divine image can be seen in scenes where a male police officer and Dr. Chilton both assert that Starling should know the "rules." Notably, they make these remarks just before she is set to visit Hannibal in two separate scenes.



Similarly, their tones are laden with suspicion, casting doubt on her ability to connect with such

a prominent figure. In contrast, Starling responds to both of them in the same manner: she remains silent and nods.

Reconnecting to Starling's physical state in the painting, holding the lamb may symbolize her generosity and ability to endure the offenses and fears projected by others. In summary, the lamb represents both the innocence and the darkness of humanity, allowing the painting to subvert traditional gender roles.

3. Cinematography

In *The Silence of the Lambs*, the male gaze frequently appears as Clarice attempts to uncover the identity of the murderer, Buffalo Bill. The gazes directed at her can be categorized into two types:

- **Discriminatory Gaze:** This gaze reflects the discrimination Clarice faces as a woman in a male-dominated environment, such as her workplace.



One scene that illustrates this gaze occurs when Clarice is surrounded by a group of imposing men in a confined space. The camera emphasizes the height and body size difference between Starling and the male agents, positioning her centrally in the shot. This arrangement highlights the power dynamics at play. The camera also captures her anxiety as she glances up at the elevator ceiling, reinforcing her sense of unease.



Another instance is during a funeral scene where the camera shows Clarice's perspective, framing the heads of male officers high above her. This angle amplifies the differences in power dynamics.

- **Objectifying Gaze:** This gaze is characterized by sexual or sexist implications.



A notable example occurs during a conversation between Clarice and Dr. Chilton, where the camera repeatedly shifts focus between Clarice's awkward smile and his face as he invites her to stay overnight in Baltimore, suggesting it could be "quite fun" with him as her guide. The angles used for Dr. Chilton's face differ from those capturing Starling's face, allowing the audience to grasp Clarice's discomfort as she recognizes Dr. Chilton's flirtation in her vision.



Additionally, Dr. Pilcher's intrusive questioning

about Clarice's personal life, despite her focus on evidence related to a victim, further illustrates the objectifying gaze. The close-up shots of his facial expressions convey Clarice's experience of being objectified.



The camera emphasizes Clarice's frown, and it mirrors the earlier conversation with Dr. Chilton: it focuses on Dr. Pilcher's face as seen through Clarice's perspective.

In conclusion, the cinematography emphasizes the contrasting power dynamics in scenes where Starling is gazed at due to discrimination, while simultaneously amplifying the facial expressions of those who sexualize her. Both ways invite the audience to empathize with Starling's experiences to feel sympathy for her situation, rather than to feel pleasure from or to gaze at a female character.

4. Combination of Symbolism and Cinematography



A worth noting point is that before the shot of her entrance to the elevator and getting surrounded by a group of red-shirt males, she went through a crowd of blue-shirt trainees.



After coming out from the elevator, the audience can see Starling coming out from the elevator alone with no red-shirt agents beside her.

The camera then shifts its focus to her path, revealing a group of management team members in suits, indicating that her boss, Crawford, will be assigning her a challenging task. This also highlights her diligence, suggesting that she is more trustworthy than other trainees and regular FBI agents. Such movement of camera and contrast in costumes demonstrate her outstanding ability as a female FBI agent.



In *The Silence of the Lambs*, another notable scene occurs at the film's beginning, where Starling exercises in a foggy forest. This scene is symbolic, conveyed through a series of meaningful camera movements.

Initially, the camera captures the foggy forest as Starling approaches. As she gets closer, the audience realizes she is exercising, evident from her sweat-soaked shirt and the sound of her labored breaths.



Next, as Clarice starts to run after a short break, she runs while the camera follows her path. This handheld tracking shot creates an unsettling atmosphere while the camera's and the character's movement overlap each other.

The remainder of the scene, until another FBI agent arrives to speak with her, continues to focus on her physical movements.

As the film's opening scene, this moment foreshadows the overarching plot and establishes the story's atmosphere: Clarice Starling will navigate a path of darkness and uncertainty, symbolized by the fog surrounding her as she runs alone. Despite her diligence and intelligence as an FBI agent, her ultimate fate is to scream like a lamb.

5. Discussion

Throughout the film, the symbolism and cinematography diverge from Mulvey's theory. The camera presents Clarice from her perspective, deliberately avoiding any encouragement for the audience to derive pleasure from her. Instead, it highlights her journey and struggles. Notably, her entrance scene emphasizes her diligence and identity, leaving little room for ego-centric viewpoints or sources of pleasure.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Silence of the Lambs* serves as a complex counterpoint to Laura Mulvey's theories on the male gaze and visual pleasure in cinema. Through its nuanced symbolism and innovative cinematography, the film shifts the focus from objectifying the female protagonist, Clarice Starling, to portraying her strength and resilience in a patriarchal environment. By presenting her journey with empathy rather than exploitation, the film challenges traditional representations of women in Hollywood. Ultimately, it invites audiences to engage with Clarice's character on a deeper emotional level, fostering a greater understanding of the struggles women face in both cinematic narratives and real life. This critical examination of gender dynamics not only enriches the film's narrative but also contributes to ongoing discussions about representation in cinema.

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