

# THE ROLE OF GENDERED GAZES IN THE DEPICTION OF ASSAULT ON SCREEN

## Abstract

What a respectful depiction of assault on screen looks like has been a topic of great debate for filmmakers and film theorists for a long time, with some being in favour of simply alluding to the assault or rape without showing it, and some being in favour of a female gaze or a sympathetic lack of power imbalance in on-screen depictions. This article intends to investigate how gazes are complicit in perpetuating the gender roles and power dynamics responsible for the lack of sympathy with which victims or survivors of rape are still treated in society. The hypothesis is that be it the perpetrator's or the victim's, any perspective in the presentation of rape on screen will present the assaulted in a circumstance without agency and should thus maybe be avoided altogether to provide the assaulted with a balanced and sympathetic medium of narrating their experience that empowers them without ever depicting them in their moment of powerlessness.

**Keywords:** This article intends to investigate how gazes are complicit in perpetuating.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

A causality between pornography and rape like what's presented by Diana E. H. Russell<sup>[1]</sup> suggests that people will inherently want to mimic behavior they see on a screen, especially if there is a reason for said behavior to appeal to them. On top of that, the issue with harmful depictions and stereotypes being represented on screen without criticism of the same is that these depictions seem to approve of those harmful norms and to a suggestible viewer, could feel like an invitation to maintain the status quo<sup>[2]</sup> irrespective of how much people around them may be rallying for change. Films are often our only way of interacting with realities outside our immediate surroundings as they bring stories from across space and time right to our doorstep on our screen. So, while discourses about better treatment of sexual assault survivors and better systems of judgment and punishment for rapists may seem more necessary, a call for reformation of the depiction of rape on screen is important as well. Problematic depictions of rape on screen often contribute to the perpetuation of misconceptions about sexual assault and the enabling of abusers, as Sarah Projansky explores in the third chapter of her book 'Watching Rape'<sup>[3]</sup>.

### 1. Categories of Depiction

- **Explicit:** The depictions of rape which do not shy away from presenting the physical violence and the non-consensual sexual acts. Throughout the article, the word explicit is used to talk about depictions that portray rape in painstaking detail but not with the intention of shocking the audience but fleshing out the narrative.
- **Gratuitous:** The depictions of rape which serve no real narrative purpose but are nonetheless extensive, included specifically for sensationalism or titillation.
- **Implicit:** The depictions of rape that convey the essence without portraying extensive details, maybe even through symbolism or fragmentation.
- **Elliptical:** A kind of implicit depiction that focuses on surroundings or secondary characters or the victim in a manner that the actual act still stays out of sight.
- **Metaphorical/Allegorical:** A depiction of rape wherein a secondary element stands in as a symbolic allusion, maybe a different form of violence which can be interpreted as a depiction of sexual violence.
- **Unseen:** The depictions of rape which happen off-screen, and are either referred to in dialogue, or else implied via scenes that portray what occurred before and after. The exact methodology and nature of the act are usually dependent on the viewer's imagination.

The next section, taking examples of films that have depictions of rape from within these categories, attempts to explain how power dynamics inform both the portrayal and the reading of sexual assault scenes on-screen. But before that, it is necessary to understand what a gendered gaze is.

2. **The Gendered Gaze:** To quote Laura Mulvey<sup>[4]</sup>, *in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining*

*male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.* It can be quite trivially concluded then, that depictions of rape through the male gaze are primarily gratuitous, focusing on the titillating aspect. Agency is not afforded to a woman presented through the male-gaze. While sexual abuse is an act that intends to steal agency from the woman, implicit, explicit, or completely unseen depictions, which are often how the female gaze portrays rape, would provide the victim with some control by placing them at the center of the narrative. So, the gendered power dynamics which go into the actual act of man-on-woman rape, are perpetuated by the depiction of rape via the male gaze.

## II. USE OF THE GAZES IN FILMS

1. ***Irréversible* (2002) dir. Gaspar Noé:** The infamous film<sup>[5]</sup> features what is arguably the worst rape scene ever committed to screen. Viewers at its Cannes premiere fainted or walked out due to the film's extreme nature. The scene in question, which is a nine-minute-long unbroken shot, depicts the rape of Alex, portrayed by Monica Bellucci, in a subway underpass. Noé employs handheld camera movements, and extreme close-ups to intensify the impact of the scene. The unrelenting nature of the camera work and the lack of traditional editing techniques create a sense of voyeurism, making the viewer uncomfortably complicit in witnessing the assault. Monica's performance, which is aware of the camera, makes the experience even more voyeuristic, and the existence of websites like RapeTube and BestRapePorn which host videos of the scene in question, is evidence that the voyeurism indeed extends to the world outside of the film.
2. ***Blonde* (2022) dir. Andrew Dominik:** Beheld less gratuitously, but nonetheless sexualized in objectionable manners, Ana de Armas' Marilyn Monroe in Dominik's film is treated as the subject of scopophilia as well, in scenes of abuse. Two decades after *Irreversible*, the problem persists. *Blonde* has abundant use of the male gaze in framing Ana as the object of visual desire, while the narrative gives her character no desirable traits. It features a harrowing blowjob scene in which her character is clearly uncomfortable and seems to have been unaware that this was expected of her. But the composition of the frames and the editing in the scene are reminiscent of pornography, and the viewer again plays a voyeuristic role by virtue of the cinematography! Even in scenes where she's mistreated, but not sexually, she's inexplicably nude or sexualized, and the experience is quite disturbing.
3. ***The Last Duel* (2021) dir. Ridley Scott:** A minimal to nil contribution to the story is a part of the definition of a gratuitous rape scene. Ridley's film presents a conundrum here because the rape scene is explicit and harrowing to watch and in fact, played thrice in the film from three different points of view. It has the potential to investigate how gendered gazes dictate the emotions triggered by the depiction of assault on screen. The three re-iterations of the protagonist's rape are presented with nuanced differences to convey perspective. The protagonist is so robbed of agency even through the rest of the film, though that it fails to empower her or criticize men and participates in the appropriation of her trauma. It's however not gratuitous because one must wonder if the point about perspectives and the role of gendered gazes could even be made without the depiction of the rape every time it's narrated.

4. ***The Virgin Spring* (1960) dir. Ingmar Bergman:** Not only is the rape scene in *The Virgin Spring* explicit, but its extreme nature also undermines the ultimate narrative of revenge which the film develops in the second half. A young girl Karin is brutally raped in the film by two men, who later on, quite unknowingly, take shelter at Karin's father's place. While there, they talk of the incident and the man realizes they raped his daughter. What follows is the cold-blooded execution of the men and the young boy who was with them, who had nothing to do with the rape. So, the daughter's abuse turns into an excuse for the wrath of man to be expressed. She is robbed of agency by the men who raped her, which is then narratively reduced to a plot point. The explicit nature of the rape, though not titillating, definitely doesn't contribute enough to the story and thus becomes gratuitous nonetheless. It undermines the exploration of the film's central themes<sup>[6]</sup>, but *The Virgin Spring* remains relevant as the forefather of most rape-revenge films<sup>[7]</sup>.
5. ***Ms. 45* (1981) dir. Abel Ferrara:** One of the better examples of the rape-revenge film directed by men, *Ms. 45* focuses almost entirely on the protagonist's crusade against rapists, which she embarks on after being raped one night. Ferrara cuts the rape scene short, practically making it an implicit scene, leaving the exact horrors to the imagination, choosing instead, to focus on the brutality of the vengeance. The violence against men in *Ms. 45* can feel gratuitous, but that works within the confines of the genre as the fantasy element is in the revenge.
6. ***Jennifer's Body* (2009) dir. Karyn Kusama:** Initially considered a failure on its theatrical release, *Jennifer's Body* has since been reclaimed as a feminist cult classic, especially in the post-#MeToo era. It tells the story of a teenager Jennifer who was subject to a Satanic sacrifice and turned into a succubus. She eats the flesh of boys to survive but is eventually killed by her best friend Needy to stop her. She gets bitten by Jennifer during said fight, and uses remnant powers granted to her by virtue of it, to enact revenge on the men who sacrificed her friend. The scene of the ritual involves a man penetrating Jennifer's body with a bowie knife repeatedly, quite gleefully. It is a metaphorical rape scene in fact, and Needy's revenge makes the film a rape-revenge one. But there is nothing gratuitous or sexual in the gaze of any scenes of violence in the film. If anything, the brutality is met with compassion which is a trademark of the female gaze<sup>[8]</sup>. It gives narrative control to the women and sympathizes with their suffering.
7. ***American Mary* (2012) Dir. Jen Soska, Sylvia Soska:** The Soska sisters' rape-revenge horror film is the epitome of the revenge fantasy because the protagonist who avenges her rape by performing extensive body modifications and surgeries on her rapist, takes things to gruesome extremes. The rape is explicit, but due to the use of the female gaze, the focus is on the woman and her feelings. The scene is framed as an act of violence against Mary. On the other hand, the moments of revenge also focus on her, portraying them as acts of violence committed by her. So, the female gaze isn't just a visual tool in *American Mary*, it's a narrative one as well.
8. ***Revenge* (2017) dir. Coralie Fargeat:** Rape-revenge is impossible to talk about without mentioning the controversial<sup>[10]</sup> *I Spit on Your Grave* films, especially the 1987 one directed by Meir Zarchi. It features explicit rape and revenge, everything shown in painful detail. Coralie's film *Revenge* would fall under the same category, but the fact that it came three decades after Meir's film and that it is directed by a woman, becomes abundantly clear from

the way the rape is treated. The scene is implicit, practically unseen, with a tenacious build-up and just a couple of fragments of the actual rape. In *I Spit on Your Grave*, the rape scene is gratuitous, played for sensationalism. The sympathies with the woman are conveyed entirely through the equally gratuitous revenge scenes. But in *Revenge*, which is plot-wise a carbon-copy, is sympathetic for the woman throughout. From focusing on misogynistic micro-aggressions to making the rape scene implicit, this rape-revenge flick focuses on the revenge and uses the rape not as a source of character development but as a trigger.

9. **Promising Young Woman (2020) dir. Emerald Fennell:** The rape-revenge films are almost always in the horror genre, be it horror comedy like *Jennifer's Body* or body horror like *American Mary*. *Promising Young Woman* paved the way for a different kind of rape-revenge film. It is a drama film. Firstly, it focuses less on avenging a particular instance of trauma and instead targets systemic rape culture, and secondly, it doesn't have actual violent revenge and instead features the "avenger" doling out lessons with the hopes of reforming men, even if it is through fear. There's one significant instance of rape but that scene is unseen. It occurs off-screen and all we see is the protagonist reacting to a video recording of the rape. Such a respectful gaze provides the woman with agency and holds the patriarchy accountable, but conveys the pain even if it doesn't actually show the rape occurring.
10. **Violation (2020) dir. Madeleine Sims-Fewer, Dusty Mancinelli:** Akin to *I Spit on Your Grave*, *Violation* has gratuitous revenge scenes. How it differs is that the rape is filmed elliptically, with disorienting focus on the victim's face. The cinematography subverts the scopophilic male gaze by making the rape obvious but obscuring it from view. The vengeance also lacks any fantasy element because it is followed by a realistic realization that there is no genuine catharsis. *Violation* may seem cynical, but it is essentially a portrait of society, sympathizing with a rape victim while simultaneously acknowledging that there is no true cathartic outlet for the pain and rage it causes.
11. **Speak (2004) dir. Jessica Sharzer:** Narratives of rape with women in control aren't always about revenge, and *Speak* is a great example to demonstrate that. The protagonist has practically lost the ability to speak, using words only when absolutely necessary. She's a social outcast, abandoned by her friends because she is depressed. It's the effect of PTSD from being raped at a party the previous year. The rape in question is filmed implicitly. It is a very short sequence where we see her face in a dimly lit car as she tries to force herself free from her assailant. The film tells the story of how she processes her trauma through artistry and gradually heals and becomes more social. The female gaze sympathetically follows her development, focusing on her experiences and reducing everything else to background noise.
12. **Incendies (2010) dir. Denis Villeneuve:** As far as unseen rape scenes go, Denis' film is a prime example of how one can convey the pain and suffering without filming an explicit rape scene, which seems to be a common motivation for filming them<sup>[12]</sup>. Nawal Marwan, one of the protagonists of *Incendies* is an empowering freedom fighter whose spirit couldn't be broken by horrible torture at regular intervals and was thus eventually raped into giving up. The rape scene in question is implicit, with the scene opening on the man observing Nawal and then cutting forward to a shot of Nawal lying on the floor in tears with her trousers pulled down and the man walking away. The impact of the occurrence is conveyed in the way Nawal's spirit breaks in the aftermath. The lack of an explicit rape scene doesn't reduce the impact.

- 13. *The Woman King* (2022) dir. Gina Prince-Bythewood:** An expansive film that tells the story of Nanisca, a fierce African woman who led an all-female army during the 1800's, *The Woman King* is a story of healing. Nanisca recruits a woman who she later learns is her own baby grown up. She had given birth after being raped by enemy soldiers all night and had given the baby away. She has to reconcile caring for a reminder of her violation, and eventually becomes a true mother to the new recruit. In the climax of the film, during an ambush, Nanisca kills the man who had raped her. Her rape is unseen and the murder is not sensationalized. This is a narrative of healing not focused on vengeance. The female gaze frames the warriors in all their glory, celebrating their militant femininity.
- 14. *Women Talking* (2022) dir. Sarah Polley:** The female gaze is not just a visual tool, but a narrative one, as must be clear from the discussions on the aforementioned films directed by women. Its strength as a narrative tool is best seen in *Women Talking*. Telling the story of a group of women in a locality who have been serially drugged and raped overnight by the men, the film presents the psychological effect of rape. The only explicit moments in the film show the women in the aftermath of their abuse, with marks, wounds, and blood on their bodies. The rapes may be unseen, but their effects are not. The victims are in control of the story and they hold the power, deciding as a collective, whether or not they'll tolerate the presence of the men who raped them.
- 15. *She Said* (2022) dir. Maria Schrader:** My final film to present as an example in this article, *She Said* follows Megan Twohey and Jodi Kantor as they investigate the Harvey Weinstein rape allegations. The rapes are described in great detail in the film, where the dialogue is presented as voiceover as panning shots of empty hotel rooms in disarray occupy the screen. This implicit method uniquely places the viewer in the headspace of the victim without depicting her in the moment of rape, preserving her agency as she controls how her story gets told.

### III. CONCLUSION

Gratuitous rape has no positive effect on a narrative. The explicit scene often helps communicate the suffering, but a re-enactment of sexual assault is never a positive influence on a story, especially not with respect to the victim's side. Empowerment would involve being in control and irrespective of how long it is, or how it's shot, a rape scene can realistically only depict powerlessness. So, the ultimate sympathetic gaze would involve implicit or unseen rape scenes, because it's necessary to ask, who does a rape scene really serve?

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