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Did We Lose The Plot?

Whenever we think of women in power, lots of different examples may come to mind. Whether the woman in power that comes to your mind is a parental figure, a woman in politics, or even superheroes such as Wonder Woman or even Cat Woman, everybody thinks of someone differently. If your mind goes to a superhero representation that we see in film and media, there's one thing that all of these women have in common: the physicality which more than likely shows the design of the character as it was designed by a man or for the male gaze.



Wonder Woman: a female character that is commonly known to cater towards the male gaze

In this essay, I would like to take a moment to explore a branch of the feminist theoretical perspective. I want to explore a newer part of the theory which has been called the "Male Gaze".

In Vanbuskirk's article that was published on verywellmind.com, Sarah quotes, "In essence, the male gaze discourages female empowerment and self-advocacy while encouraging self-objectification and deference to men and the patriarchy at large." While these characters are nothing more than innocent to a child's eye, there is definitely an underlying "Let's make these characters physically appealing to the male audience that would be forced to watching it with their children."

The representation of women in media has changed and fluctuated in many different ways in media, from the 2019 adaptation directed by Greta Gerwig of *Little Women*, Jo March has an insanely powerful monologue where she states that, "I just feel like women, they have minds and they have souls, as well as just hearts, and they've got ambition and they've got talent, as well as just beauty."



Saoirse Ronan, as the character Jo March in Little Women - 2019

While there is nothing wrong with an attractive woman being in charge and dominating every stereotype that we face, the oversexualization of characters is a driving force in the toxicity

of thinking that we have to be attractive or even lusted upon by a man to be worth something.



America Ferrera in Barbie, 2023

Although feminism has always been large in media, the characters that we have been conditioned to think were strong willed and worth something were always stick thin and seen, but never heard. The best way to sum this up is an emotional delivery of a monologue, that I have edited and cut down, from director Greta Gerwig's 2023 movie *Barbie* that was delivered by Los Angeles actress America Ferrera, which has had a large effect on the emotional toll that women have never been able to put into words until this movie came out.

“It is literally impossible to be a woman...Like, we have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we're always doing it wrong. You have to be thin, but not too thin. And you can never say you want to be thin. You have to say you want to be healthy, but also you have to be thin...You have to be a boss, but you can't be mean. You have to lead, but you can't squash other people's ideas...You have to be a career woman, but also always be looking out for other people. You have to answer for men's bad behavior, which is

insane, but if you point that out, you're accused of complaining. You're supposed to stay pretty for men, but not so pretty that you tempt them too much or that you threaten other women because you're supposed to be a part of the sisterhood...You have to never get old, never be rude, never show off, never be selfish, never fall down, never fail, never show fear, never get out of line. It's too hard! It's too contradictory and nobody gives you a medal or says thank you! And it turns out in fact that not only are you doing everything wrong, but also everything is your fault...And if all of that is also true for a doll just representing women, then I don't even know."

In the four year gap of *Little Women* and *Barbie* coming out and changing the impact of cinema and media, the impact that both of these movies have had on how women have seen themselves and seen the worth that they both carry towards women and the way that others see women has been something that has been discussed many different times in media. Although *Little Women* was based on the novel written by Louisa May Alcott and *Barbie* was based on the doll, these are still iconic pieces of girlhood and the center of what many women wish that they could articulate. Seeing how women have grasped the words, taken them to heart, and even though media and film are still everchanging with women, having these two revolutionary moments is something that has been a win for women and the worth and pressure that is placed on us from a young age.

Growing up, when faced with these characters at a young age, such as growing up with Disney films such as *Zootopia*, although we may be given a strong female-lead character, the physicality of these women that we are supposed to look up to, when given the "I want to act like ____" also give us the "I want to *look* like ____". While Disney has provided countless amounts of entertainment ever since the company was established in October of 1923, seeing the

pattern of how the ambitious and driven characters are always on a pedestal of male gaze and sexualized makes one think deeply about how media portrays women in the first place. The driving plot of the film *Zootopia* was for a small-town bunny, named Judy Hopps, to rise above the objectification of those around her and inside of the police academy to defy the odds and become the best cop that has come out of the town. While the other animals in the police academy make fun of Judy and continuously call her a “dumb bunny”, Judy does everything in her power to make sure that she rises above the stereotypes that the rest of the characters in this film have labeled her under.



Judy Hopps, the female protagonist from the 2016 Disney film “Zootopia”

This makes the story to be a lovable underdog character rises to fame. The character of Judy in the film is one of which that young women are able to look up to, with a strong driving and determinate personality, she refuses to let the voice of the town bother her as well as her family and few friends. Throughout the movie, Judy goes on to not only defy what the rest of the

town says by rising to action and ends up becoming not only a strong-willed character that we all grow to love from her journey of defiance, but ends up graduating as top of her class from the police academy that is in *Zootopia*. In the movie, her counterpart is a fox named Nick that even says to her,

“Tell me if this story sounds familiar: naive little hick with good grades and big ideas decides, "Hey, look at me, I'm gonna move to Zootopia, where predators and prey live in harmony and sing Kumbaya!" Only to find, whoopsie: we don't all get along. And that dream of becoming a big city cop? Double whoopsie: she's a meter maid. And whoopsie number three-sie: no one cares about her or her dreams. And soon enough, those dreams die, and our bunny sinks into an emotional and literal squalor living in a box under a bridge until finally, she has no choice but to go back home with that cute, fuzzy-wuzzy little tail between her legs to become... you're from Bunnyburrow, is that what you said? So how about a carrot farmer?”

With the stereotype that Nick throws into her face, this is the driving force for Judy to prove the rest of the city and everyone who never believed in her wrong. Judy's resilience and determination throughout the movie shows how even though she is a small and frail character, just from the characteristics of what a rabbit is historically known as being, that even she goes far beyond expectations.

While Disney has historically been known for empowerment of female characters, many of the characters such as Judy from *Zootopia*, Rapunzel from *Tangled*, and even earlier characters such as Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* have driving plots where the main character goes on an adventure to prove her self-worth. The main factor that all of these characters have in common is not just a hard-driven attitude and personality, but rather the physicality of their

characters: a petite frame and pleading eyes. In Laura Mulvey's essay entitled, "Visual Pleasure And Narrative Cinema", Mulvey states,

"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 a strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*."

In the same paragraph, Mulvey writes,

"The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation."

Seeing the way that Mulvey has put together the essay on the male gaze and how times are still very much on the receiving end of what Mulvey has said, the phrase "erotic contemplation" is probably one of the most perfect phrases that anybody could have put together for this exact sentiment that she was wanting to express for this essay.



Tex Avery Wolf, the character known for over-the-top and exaggerated reactions, focusing on the female's body other than the actual character herself

While Disney has a history of strong female characters, what strikes me the most about Judy Hopps is the fact that she is a bunny. Not only is this character a rabbit, but a *female* rabbit. I had the same realization as the author of the article “Small Town Rabbit Defies The Odds” from femfilm16.wordpress.com,

“Judy is a female rabbit; not only has there never been a rabbit cop, but she is also a *female* rabbit trying to be a cop. So she’s a small preyed upon animal AND a female.”

So not only is Judy small, frail, drawn to be more ‘attractive’, but she is a character that is, in nature, made to be preyed upon.

Media is ever changing and so is the way that lovable characters have been portrayed over the years and they years to come. And while many of these characters and their physicality may seem harmless, it does not change how from Wonder Woman to Judy Hopps, that the years have gone by but the male gaze has existed for longer than we can even begin to fathom. While we have many characters growing up that we love, the importance beyond what our lovable characters stands for and represents feel as if the entirety of their meaning has been lost as it feels like we are unable to have a character that has yet to be uncatered towards the male gaze.

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