“She’s Gazing like the Man”: Parallels between Laura Mulvey’s and John Berger’s Feminist Film Theory in Andy Flickman’s She’s the Man

Julia Sebastien
Western University, jsebast4@uwo.ca

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Abstract
This essay explores how director Andy Flickman both captures, indulges, subverts and parodies Laura Mulvey’s notion of the Gaze in his 2006 Romantic Comedy film, She’s the Man, based on Shakespeare’s comedic play Twelfth Night. After defining the Gaze, how this camera technique is achieved in film, and John Berger’s link between the Gaze and female self-objectification, my essay illustrates how She’s the Man parallels the female experience of adopting the heterosexual male perspective since, in order to escape the sexist gender role forced upon her, protagonist Viola Hastings disguises herself as her brother, a heterosexual male, so she can play for his school’s male soccer team. In doing so, Viola must (feign to) adopt the heterosexual male perspective, which ironically, entails treating and Gazing at women as sexual objects. Interestingly, adopting the heterosexual male perspective ultimately influences Viola to train a sexualizing Gaze on women even in her own mind. Still, after demonstrating Mulvey’s observation that women are often subjected to—and made to adopt—objectifying and sexualizing gazes, She’s the Man plays with Mulvey’s and Berger’s theories about the Gaze by parodying and subverting viewers’ expectations of the camera technique. In doing so, Flickman brilliantly proves that just as the Gaze camera technique can turn viewers to voyeurs, so can it be used to alert viewers to its manipulative power.

Keywords
She’s The Man, Laura Mulvey, male gaze

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In her article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey argues that female characters in film are often simply “erotic object[s] for the characters within the screen story, and … the spectator” (838). According to Mulvey, the objectification of female characters is often carried out through “the Gaze”: a visual technique whereby the camera “displays [the female form] for [men’s] enjoyment,” sexually objectifying the female through a heterosexual male’s perspective (Mulvey 837). Intriguingly, Mulvey argues that this camera technique also forces female viewers, who are likely to identify with female characters, too observe the female from a heterosexual male’s perspective and thereby objectify female characters in the same way. As John Berger theorizes in Ways of Seeing, female viewers can thus be influenced to “[view] themselves [as] an object”. The film She’s the Man, directed by Andy Flickman, both showcases the objectifying power of the Gaze and suggests two means of thwarting it.

The objectification of females is a central theme in Andy Flickman’s 2006 film, She’s the Man. In this film, soccer player Viola Hastings impersonates her brother, Sebastian, to play for the male soccer team, prove her skills to her sexist ex-boyfriend and his coach, and avoid becoming a debutante like her mother wishes she would. Viola’s experiences parallel Mulvey’s theory of the Gaze and Berger’s theory of the female turning the Gaze on her own gender: Viola is subjected to the limiting “Gaze” of patriarchal society before she, disguised as her brother, assumes the perspective of a heterosexual male and turns the objectifying Gaze on others.
Viola is first subjected to Mulvey’s idea of the patriarchal objectification of women by her own mother, who bemoans her daughter’s love for “kick[ing] a muddy ball around a field all day” and values only Viola’s physical appearance, giving her “beautiful gowns” and commenting on how attractive Viola’s ex-boyfriend would find her (Flickman). Though the coach’s and the mother’s limiting views of Viola are not literal examples of Mulvey’s sexualizing “Gazes,” they discourage Viola’s athleticism because they are “caught” in the same “sexual imbalance” that Mulvey claims structured film form and engendered the “Male Gaze” (837).

Not only does She’s the Man illustrate Mulvey’s theory that females are pressured to conform to the “patriarchal order,” but it also shows the effect adopting the “Male Gaze” has on women. When Viola’s experience with gender-based discrimination drives her to literally play the part of a heterosexual male, she uses objectifying “Gaze” tactics on women to convincingly emulate the heterosexual male perspective. When Duke (and the camera) “Gaze” at Olivia’s posterior, Viola, acting as a heterosexual male, joins in objectifying her, exclaiming, “Oh, yeah! Check out the booty on that blondie”. Later, Viola-as-Sebastian also asks Duke “which [of two girls] would [he] rather see naked?” (Flickman). Viola’s behaviour extends to the way she behaves with other women, as when she calls one woman a “foxy mama” and asks her female friends to publicly flirt with Viola and display their sexuality to the Gaze of her peers to improve “Sebastian”’s reputation (Flickman 2006). Viola further objectifies these women when she tells one she “[woul]d tap [her]”, and spanks another like a “plaything”, saying she “w[as]n’t woman enough for [“Sebastian”]” (Flickman). Viola’s behavior exemplifies Mulvey’s theory since, while impersonating Sebastian, Viola adopts the male perspective and reduces
women to “sexualized” “object[s] of the combined gaze of [the] spectator and all the male protagonists in the film” (Mulvey 838).

*She’s the Man* also portrays Berger’s theory that film’s objectifying “Gaze” can influence women to objectify others in real life; even in her own private thoughts, Viola begins to objectify both women and men. For example, after finding out that Duke is attracted to Olivia, Viola “Gazes” at Olivia at a Debutant meeting and idealizes her. To showcase Viola’s inner thoughts, the camera employs the Gaze technique, taking up Viola’s perspective and locking in on Olivia as she laughs, eats, and socializes in a perfectly ladylike manner. This cut, which presents Viola’s view of Olivia as the epitome of femininity and grace, shows that Viola sees Olivia through Duke’s eyes and has adopted Duke’s heterosexual male perspective. Thus, when Viola Gazes at Olivia, though not with sexual desire, she uses the heterosexual male perspective in her private thoughts. Viola also sexually objectifies Eunice, a homely and socially awkward girl, by Gazing at her disgustedly during their date. While Viola, as a heterosexual female, rejects both Eunice’s and Olivia’s sexual advances, she continuously responds to Eunice’s unattractive behaviour with a disgusted gaze. Viola’s disgust at Eunice reveals that Viola, despite her sexual orientation, views Eunice as fundamentally sexually unappealing (Flickman). Thus, Viola’s disgusted Gaze sexually assesses Eunice from both a female’s and a male’s perspective and reduces Eunice to an object, albeit an unappealing one (Flickman). Viola even turns this objectifying Gaze on men when she—still outfitted as Sebastian—Gazes lustfully at a half-naked Duke in the locker-room, indulging her private self in the same lustful objectifying gaze that she used on women. By doing so, she demonstrates Berger’s theory that women who take on a heterosexual
male’s objectifying perspective, even temporarily, may objectify both men and women in the same way in her own mind.

One could interpret Viola-as-Sebastian’s lustful Gaze at Duke in the gym as an example of what Bell Hooks might call the “Oppositional Gaze,” since one could read it as Viola, a female and thus an object of sexual objectification, “defy[ing]” the male Gaze and reclaiming sexual power over her—or other females’ objectifier—and gaining power in looking (116). It is important to note, however, that not only is Viola’s Gaze desirous rather than “critica[l]” (Hooks 122), but also that only Viola-as-Sebastien employs this sexualizing Gaze, coupled with the camera technique, and never Viola-as-herself (Flickman), which undermines the “rebellious[ness]” of Viola’s sexual Gaze (Hooks 116). Flickman, then, does not seem to use the Gaze as a means of granting females qua females sexually objectifying power over males. Instead, since Viola may only test this objectifying power when impersonating a heterosexual male, it seems Viola-as-Sebastian’s objectifying Gaze at Duke is a mere extension of the objectifying sexual Gaze Viola-as-Sebastian already employs on females from a male perspective, though this time it has homosexual undertones. Interestingly, Flickman uses the theme of homosexuality as a comedic device multiple times throughout the film. For example, when Viola-as-Sebastian’s is distracted during her conversation with Duke, Viola-as-Sebastian must desperately and humorously attempt to thwart Duke’s suspicion of what he might interpret as homosexual undertones. Flickman uses homosexual undertones as a humorous device in other scenes, as well, namely when Viola-as-Sebastian and Duke embrace in their mutual fear of a mouse; afterwards, Duke humorously fails at feigning a nonchalant attitude to hide his extreme embarrassment and discomfort at engaging in an
activity he feels has homosexual undertones (Flickman). If Viola-as-Sebastian’s lustful Gaze at Duke is but a further demonstration of the influencing power of adopting the sexually objectifying Gaze, then perhaps Viola-as-Sebastian’s lustful Gaze more closely emulates a homosexual male’s Gaze than her own. Interpreting Viola-as-Sebastian’s sexualization of Duke as a homosexual Gaze rather than a female’s oppositional Gaze thus seems one more internally consistent with the film, as it resonates with another moment that achieves humour via homosexual themes. Thus, in both moments, it seems Viola-as-Sebastian’s attraction to Duke, rather than empowering Viola as a female with the power to sexually objectify a male, seemingly serves the comedic purpose of suggesting a misunderstanding regarding homosexual intent, which adds an element of humour to employing the Gaze. Viola-as-Sebastian’s lustful Gaze at Duke, then, which Viola-as-herself never attempts, is but an extension of the powerful, sexually objectifying male Gaze.

Viola’s adoption of the male Gaze ends when both Viola and Sebastian flash the whole school to clarify their respective identities. The scene thus challenges the Male Gaze and sexual objectification of passive females in two ways: first, Viola and Sebastian equally expose themselves to sexual objectification during a soccer game, making both genders not only equal but also active agents in their objectification. Second, the camera denies viewer participation in their sexual objectification by cutting away from Viola’s and Sebastian’s exposed bodies. By deliberately denying viewers the chance to voyeuristically gaze at Viola’s and Sebastian’s exposed bodies—an even more sexually objectifying view than those characteristic of women in bathing suits, underwear, or
evening gowns in Classic Hollywood—the camera simultaneously promotes gender equity and opposes male and female sexual objectification in film.

*She’s the Man* also presents two solutions to the patriarchal Gaze: promoting nonsexual representations of females—for example, when it showcases how Viola’s athletic skills make the coach, her mother, and the audience see past their limiting views of women—and satirizing the Gaze. In many instances, the film shows sexualizing Gazes in humorous situations, suggesting to the viewers that sexual objectification is ridiculous and inappropriate. For example, when Viola first steps out of the car after her makeover into “Sebastian,” the camera trains the full Gaze on her, moving in a slow pan from toe to head with sensual music playing (Flickman). In this scene, viewers find the use of the Gaze technique funny, as it creates a disparity between the sexualizing Gaze and the humorously nonsexual image of Viola attempting to impersonate a male. By subverting their expectations, the film makes viewers consciously aware of their passive, hegemonic acceptance of the role of “the Gaze” in dictating when and how to sexually objectify people. *She’s the Man* also satirizes the “Gaze” when Olivia gazes lustfully at Viola in the gym, since Olivia’s mistaken perception of Viola as a desirable male is misguided and amusing (Flickman). While Olivia’s Gaze at Viola is a sexual one, Olivia’s gaze subverts the gaze camera technique in three ways: first, the camera mainly focuses on Olivia while Olivia Gazes at Viola instead of cutting away to the object of said Gaze. In this way, the camera subverts viewers’ expectations to see—and share—the objectifier’s perspective, rendering Olivia’s Gaze powerless to influence viewers’ perspective on Viola as a sexual object. Second, when the camera does flick to Viola, as it does for only a second, it showcases Viola striking a visibly awkward pose as she talks
to Duke in her male disguise. Third, despite Olivia’s sexualizing Gaze, the viewer cannot be influenced by Olivia’s Gaze because of the dramatic irony palpable in the scene: Viola is female. Thus, Olivia’s Gaze cannot influence viewers to adopt her perspective regarding Viola since viewers know that even Olivia does not truly find Viola sexually attractive. In this way, Olivia’s sexualizing gaze at Viola shows the Gaze as only something to be ridiculed by viewers and not adopted.

Andy Flickman’s film, *She’s the Man*, both parallels and illustrates the plausibility of Laura Mulvey’s and John Berger’s feminist theories, that the Gaze camera technique is a tool of objectification that can influence even a female to adopt a male perspective and train the male Gaze on others. By presenting alternative representations of women, and by subverting the Gaze’s sexually objectifying powers via humorous homosexual undertones, and training it on non-sexual characters, Flickman’s film also sends a message much in opposition to objectification of either sex, and uses film’s own objectifying techniques to confront the historical objectification of women in cinema. In this way, *She’s the Man* uses camera techniques and comedy to harnesses the power of “the Gaze” to promote a message about gender-equality and sexual objectification.

Today, we face more pressing questions than male-female gender performance with the rise of asexual and agender awareness in the mainstream. One might wonder whether the film’s portrayal of Viola’s elaborate disguise as a heterosexual male, which requires her to switch back and forth between extravagant Debutante dresses and sideburns and soccer uniforms—sometimes multiple times in a day—might lend itself to an agender theoretical interpretation, since Viola, as she struggles with gender norms during her journey to self-
actualization, seems to regard her own “natural” gender role as a feminine female to be just as much of a costume as her disguise.

Works Cited


