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The Origins of Classic Hollywood's Male Gaze

By Federico Guevara

Abstract: Male dominance of Hollywood productions solidified inadvertently in the 1930s through the implementation of Catholic morality on screen, which precipitously narrowed the scope of experiences and desires of women depicted in entertainment media for the ensuing decades. Tracing back the behind-the-scenes origins and development of Hollywood's persistent male gaze, it becomes clear that women in the entertainment industry had some real agency and power in the 1920s, prior to the Catholic Legion of Decency's interference in movie making. These censorship rules, which became known as the Hays Code and were argued to be good for the whole of society, consequently institutionalized a male gaze in films and went on to influence perceptions of women for entire generations—which are being challenged in part by the Me Too Movement today. The chain of events that explains how women on screen in the 1940s and 1950s were pressured to fit narrow standards considered pleasing to men, shows how Hollywood shifted from a once relatively equitable industry in the twenties and thirties, to a male dominated one due in large part to outside religious influences.

The enforcement of early censorship codes happened primarily in response to threats to studios' revenue during the Great Depression. Catholic leaders organized church members to boycott or threaten to boycott motion pictures they deemed scandalous.¹

¹ Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema 1930-1934*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 321.

They published statements across the country to create a bad reputation for the producers of those movies, and the powerful sensationalist William Randolph Hearst fanned the flames of outrage, as well as alleged conflicts behind the scenes.² This pressure is how religiously-driven censorship rules in the mid-1930s unwittingly narrowed Hollywood studios' broad representation of women and their experiences and expressions, and the Catholic patriarchy drove creative women out of the industry.

Women navigating within the male dominated Hollywood of the forties, including Rita Hayworth and Judy Garland, experienced pressures from studio executives which drastically altered their identity. The subsequent advent of the WWII bombshell sex symbol and then the drastic shift to the housewife as the universal woman in the 1950s, stemmed mostly from the bureaucratized male gaze which cemented itself through the religious interference in movie productions decades prior. The pressures women entertainers faced harmed the actresses, and to a large extent influenced the ideal of womanhood for entire generations after the censorship codes were adopted. As these negative influences are being publicly fought today, the idea that women are incapable of having authority within Hollywood can be entirely shattered, especially with the understanding of how they had their power precipitously stripped in this industry eight decades ago.

The concept of the male gaze in movies at its core describes who has the power to control the camera, to show the audience things from their own perspective. The male gaze is not simply a term to explain how characters who are male within a story consciously view characters who are women from their male character's perspective, the audience is usually well aware of the male lead's particular point of view. Under the context of its influence through the twentieth century in regard to how it shaped

² Gerald Gardner, *The Censorship Papers: Movie Censorship Letters from the Hays Office, 1934 to 1968* (New York: Dodd, Mead Company, 1987), 17.

audiences' expectations and views on women, the male gaze can be simply described as the way in which cinematographers film women.³ It is how producers assume heterosexual audiences want to see women depicted, it is ultimately the power men have to characterize women as a thing to be looked at. Simply put, in the context of film, the male gaze is how women characters are shown to an audience and it tends to be an interpretation of women under a shallow male's opinion.

The male gaze is not necessarily always about women being overtly sexual, it is also the way writers portray women characters' ways of thinking and motives in their stories as well. It is a particular way that women are displayed to viewers through how they behave and what their motivations and goals are. It became the reason that made women characters simple, one-dimensional, and usually naïve in contrast to their male counterparts. It is what makes women in movies not only a thing to be looked at, often a thing to be dominated, but also a thing that rarely speaks. It is crucial to realize the male gaze is men controlling the camera as well as the minds of the women characters they create, and can be done when men are the ones with the power of production. By extension, it is what has kept women in the entertainment industry from having the same wide range of role choices as actors who are men.

The recent outing of abusers in Hollywood might be a sign the trend may change from what was unfortunately the norm, yet the male gaze will still take some time to disappear entirely after its rise to dominance in the middle of the twentieth century worked to reinforce gender roles in mainstream American culture. It is impossible to determine its longer lasting effects on audiences given the power of other entertainment media, and the fact the male gaze has shifted to video games.⁴ Nevertheless, the Me Too

³ Gabriele Griffin, *A Dictionary of Gender Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁴ Nicholas Johnson, "Misogyny in Virtual Space: Exploring Representations of Women In Popular Video Games," (MA Thesis, Middle Tennessee State University, 2015).

Movement has extended beyond the glamor and wealth of Hollywood to encourage all women around the globe to speak up about their experiences with sexual misconduct and to bring about real change, as in the case of US gymnastics which had been for too long ignored.⁵ The world outside of Hollywood also grapples with the success of feminism, as some world leaders proudly call themselves feminists, to the horror of contemporary confused and misinformed anti-feminists.⁶

Nearly a hundred years ago, movies which exhibited strong female leads, where women characters were often in the same level of men, included dialogue and images that upset conservative religious groups in the 1920s. In the contemporaneous spirit of suffragists, women characters on film were sharp, talked back, and freed themselves from domineering men, as with 1933's *Female*. This film demonstrated women were tough and in charge, even depicted as CEOs with male subordinates who fall in love with them, and had to be turned away.⁷ These early Classic Hollywood depictions of women showed they knew what they wanted; and while in the dominant culture it was still taboo, women in movies freely expressed their sexuality, including participating in happy polyamorous relationships and lesbian relationships without negative consequences. With women writing, producing, and directing other women, this era had a relatively balanced representation of genders compared to what was to come.

Movies like the original 1933's *Baby Face* would have never made it past the code which was ultimately enforced in 1934. It told the story of a girl pimped by her father in a brothel that housed at least one black woman. Eventually the young girl rebels when she grows up and tells her father that, of all the men she has known, he is the dirtiest. Using her street smarts, she acquires

⁵ Carla Correa, "The #MeToo Moment: For U.S. Gymnasts, Why Did Justice Take So Long?" *New York Times*, January 25, 2018.

⁶ Ishaan Tharoor, "How Anti-feminism is Shaping World Politics." *The Washington Post*, January 30, 2018.

⁷ Jennifer Tang, "The Forgotten Women of Pre-Code: An Annotated Filmography and Bibliography," *Feminist Teacher* 20, no. 3 (2010): 238.

wealth and a position in a bank where she gets revenge on the scoundrels who abused her.⁸ As female sexuality is overtly exploited in this film, portions of the dialogue were censored upon its release by the first production code enforcers in Hollywood. What they failed to note in censoring such films is that films portraying lower class situations worked as social criticisms, condemning a society in which a woman is forced to use her physical charms to survive. Another example of women who asserted themselves was also widely released the year before the Hays Code enforced censorship, 1933's *Queen Christina*. Hollywood's leading lady that year played a lesbian queen and kissed her lover on camera. In the film she also disguises herself as a man, and when she goes down to a bar where men discuss how many lovers the queen had, she reveals herself and says "twelve, just this year."⁹ This shows how women before the Code were independent in contrast to the silent, objectified bombshells of the forties, and the dutiful domesticated housewives of the fifties.

Will H. Hays, a Republican, Presbyterian Church elder, promised in 1930 to regulate the content of movies after he was appointed to lead the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America.¹⁰ Though much maligned by Hollywood executives, Hays essentially worked as a middleman who tried to appease highly organized and influential Catholic groups as well as Protestants, who wanted the imposition of moral order and proposed a Motion Picture Production Code to the major Hollywood studios.¹¹ Though the code itself was written by a Catholic publisher and a Jesuit priest, and then enforced by a prominent Catholic layman appointed by Hays, it would become known as The Hays Code because he was head of the MPPDA association during its start.

Among many acts regulated or forbidden in the list titled "The Production Code," its Catholic authors included: sexual

⁸ Ibid., 238.

⁹ Ibid., 240.

¹⁰ Mark A. Vieira, *Sin in Soft Focus* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. 1999), 7.

¹¹ Ibid., 17.

hygiene, excessive and lustful kissing, interracial relationships, ridicule of clergy, offence to the nation, men and women in a bed together, and childbirth.¹² Women's bodies, and their activities outside of a marriage, were effectively censored through Hays' Code, which impacted all of Hollywood. Many other items on the list could be open to interpretation, but they essentially banned fluid sexuality and relationships, and depictions of nudity or sex of any kind.¹³ Along with the code, church leadership published essays with their reasons for supporting the Code.¹⁴

With heavy regulation and the narrowing of women's personalities and desires on screen, creative women behind the scenes were also discouraged. As a patriarchal institution, the Catholic Church to this day does not approve of women in leadership positions or with any form of power over men in the church.¹⁵ Catholics' sacred scriptures are replete with instances of women explicitly being told to be silent and submit to men.¹⁶ In what can be understood to be an ancient version of the male gaze, the creation story which Catholic censors in the thirties adhered to, had a woman driving humanity towards original sin and away from God and eternal life. There is an unfortunate irony in censors being able to interpret sacred tales with a moral message in the end, and yet not being able to understand how art in their own time could also send an ethical message using metaphors as well. The films made before the Code often critiqued society as a whole, from what some women had to do to survive, to how the downtrodden were exploited. The movies produced in the decade prior to the code did not always encourage what was perceived as immoral behavior, but rather lamented it as an effect of unfair and rigid

¹² Leonard Leff and Jerold L. Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 286-300.

¹³ Gardner, *Censorship Papers*, 213-214.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁵ Margery Eagan, "Why don't Women have a Role in the Catholic Church?" *Boston Globe*, August 23, 2018.

¹⁶ Holy Bible, King James Version, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984, 1 Timothy 2:12.

social structures, and they were in essence not much different from moralistic tales of old. This was lost to the censors, who could easily understand the morals in Biblical tales despite talking donkeys and men living inside of fish. Despite all the violence and bizarre norms found in these ancient written stories, Catholic men rationalized them as an inspiration and guide for how everyone should live their life, yet movies appeared to be far too complex for them. Not much has changed since then, as opposition by some within the church against this ingrained misogyny results in their excommunication.¹⁷ In 1930s Hollywood, opposition to this worldview came to mean fines and unemployment.

As women's roles became limited and women behind the scenes had no power, by the 1940s men has almost entirely taken over Hollywood's productions. The amalgamation of major studios kept men in charge, who abided by the code, and they depicted women from their point of view only. Actresses were directly told to be thin no matter what it took. They gradually became expected to dumb themselves down relative to previous roles, and become even more white-washed; something which would be more evident later when the Code lost its power, but male domination remained. Compared to the women of the 20s and early 30s, Hollywood's own version of the *separate spheres* manifested itself as a shrinking one for women, while men occupied any sphere they wanted, or rather women had none to fit into. Women characters who were shown to be older and independent on screen were usually the villains, or were for men to tame. Producers who had made their niche portraying powerful women or who felt they had to challenge expectations and continue to make 20s female characters, no longer had a career.

Catholic censors may not have sought this turn of events, yet with limited options and every aspect of the industry under male control, women on screen ironically became overly sexualized objects of desire for men in succeeding years after the

¹⁷ John Hooper, "Catholics Angry as Church Puts Female Ordination On Par with Sex Abuse," *The Guardian*, July 15, 2010.

Code's enforcement waned. The shallow and submissive representations of women in movies in the ensuing decades stemmed from male executives and producers who would fund movies which males wrote and directed, and who they assumed would have large male audiences. Unintended or not, it is from this religiously inspired reform to movie topics and movie making in the mid-thirties that created the intensification of the male gaze in Hollywood.

The changing perception of women caused by the takeover by religious men and the exodus of women from behind the scenes of 1930s Hollywood, was further reinforced by major world events. In World War II, military pilots sought out caricatured images of sexually appealing women to paint on their planes, and adopted the slang word *bombshell* to mean an alluring woman. These idealized bombshells were equated with weapons of mass destruction during this time because of the perceived devastating and explosive power of women's sexuality. Like the atomic bomb, women's sexuality was thought of as a destructive force to be tamed, and later to be domesticated and contained like a sexual pet in the Playboy bunny style. Hollywood's most popular red-headed bombshell at the time was Rita Hayworth, and indeed her sexuality was seen as dangerous; in her movies she could ruin men with it.¹⁸ Hayworth's natural beauty was not potent enough to fit into the parameters established by the male gaze.¹⁹ Her real name, Margarita Carmen Cansino, was changed by Columbia Studios, her famous red hair was naturally black, and her manager pushed her to have extensive plastic surgery to make herself appear even whiter.²⁰

To be sure, there is nothing wrong with a woman having plastic surgery of her own free will, changing her name or hair

¹⁸ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 62.

¹⁹ Priscilla Peña Ovalle, *Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex, and Stardom* (NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 71.

²⁰ Karen Burroughs Hannsberry, *Femme Noir: Bad Girls of Film* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1998), 253-255.

color, but Hayworth was made to do it by Hollywood studios. That was the problem with the absolute male control of Hollywood after the Hays Code suppressed women's power in the industry. Men now controlled every part of an actress' image, and the actress herself lost agency. Beyond controlling their appearance, male-managed studios controlled their actresses' personal life as well. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios forced Judy Garland of *Wizard of Oz* fame, to have multiple abortions in order to maintain her persona of a young girl on camera well into her adulthood.²¹ As a teenager, she was given drugs by the male heads of the studio to force her to keep up with her demanding schedule, something she would reveal later in her life.²² Her addiction to these very drugs is what eventually killed her.

Displaying intelligence on or off the screen was not appreciated or respected, as Hedy Lamarr found out in the forties. While being considered one of the most beautiful women in the world, in her personal life the leading lady devoted her time to being an inventor, and she developed technology for a secret communication system that was so advanced for its time that it took decades to develop and put to use.²³ It is still being used today by Navy satellite systems and Bluetooth communications. Today the actress' inventions are worth billions, but Lamarr was only encouraged to act docily and be in front of a camera; she never received compensation for her work, as her patent allegedly expired before anyone reported having put her ideas to use. It was not until the 1990s that scientific organizations like the Electronic Frontier Foundation and others began to recognize and award her posthumously.²⁴

²¹ Marcie Bianco, "Classic Hollywood's Secret: Studios Wanted Their Stars to Have Abortions," *Vanity Fair*. July 15, 2016.

²² Richard A. Lertzman, *The Life and Times of Mickey Rooney* (New York: Gallery Books, 2015), 155.

²³ Ruth Barton, *Hedy Lamarr: The Most Beautiful Woman in Film* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 122.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 226.

In 1950s Hollywood, white women were preferred above any ethnicity to the point that white women were expected to be even whiter than they already were. Marilyn Monroe, the epitome of the blond bombshell, was not a real blond. She also had plastic surgeries, among them one to make her nose smaller, and changed what was thought of as her bland, real name, at the behest of male managers.²⁵ Americans putting white women on a pedestal was rooted in the spread of irrational fears Southerners had about freed black males after the Civil War, fears also shown in the earliest films ever made, as with the ravaging brutes in *Birth of a Nation*. Under the male gaze, Hollywood actresses like Monroe also continuously played dumb helpless sexual objects, who either needed men to guide them or were a dangerous temptation for husbands.

Catholic groups may not have deliberately meant for any of this to happen. Their censorship rules might not have had the goal of turning women solely into objects of desire for men. Yet by bringing their personal morality into the film industry they forged a path that led to the subjugation of creative women entertainers and their loss of power. This had a lasting effect on media for at least two decades before the radical sixties. They took away the power women producers had to depict women like themselves in positions of power, and as women in control of their sexuality.

Other significant world events following WWII further solidified the male gaze in the media, though the push to re-domesticate women in the decade of the 1950s shifted their depictions from sexual objects to conservative housewives. The Cold War saw the United States position itself as the side that championed democracy and freedom—without a sense of irony and by ignoring millions of its minoritized and disenfranchised citizens—and this was expressed in the form of consumerism.²⁶ Recurring advertisements geared towards women reminded them they belonged in their kitchen and raising children. Advertisers fed

²⁵ Paul Donnelly, *Marilyn Monroe* (London: Pocket Essentials, 2000), 11.

²⁶ May, *Homeward Bound*, 162.

into the hegemonic patriarchy of suburbia, and television made it all the easier. Television and the expansion of mass media also made the Hays Code more difficult to enforce, and by the end of the fifties it began to lose its power, being replaced in the sixties with today's voluntary movie rating system from the Motion Picture Association of America.²⁷

For the sake of fairness, some arguments could be looked at which challenge the notion of the intensification of the Hollywood male gaze in the decades following the Hays Code. An excellent example may be the enormously popular TV show of the 1950s, *I Love Lucy*, which seemed to defy domesticity on a weekly basis for all of suburban America who watched television. In every episode, Lucy made attempts at some semblance of independence, as she defied her husband and secretly ventured into the working world. The truth is that Lucy always ended up crying at the end of every such episode and realized her place was in the kitchen. Through comedy she portrayed *the problem that has no name*, the frustrations of suburban housewives of post-WWII middle class America. Yet the moral of the show was that chaos ensued once a housewife veered too far from her traditional sphere and gender role.

Furthermore, and most importantly, Lucy did it for laughs and all within the code. She disobeyed her husband, and went into the workforce for comedy's sake, and it was all filmed by following the code which among other things kept their beds separate. She was silly for dreaming or attempting to do anything outside of the domestic sphere, and it always backfired on her when she tried. Additionally, Lucy had a level of personal freedom due to her being white, relatively well-off, thin, and could have easily been regarded as a breathtaking beauty of her time even when she chose to be a clown. It must be noted as well that Lucy undermined the authority of a husband who was a minority. Ricky was not a white American, and very often his Spanish dialogue was a joke itself. It is not too far-fetched of an assumption to

²⁷ Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 345.

realize a real-life Lucy would have never stood up to her husband had he been a John Wayne, and him merely speaking his English language would not have been treated as a joke.

A notable exception that may run counter to the argument that beautiful women needed to fit a very narrow standard which included being white, is the fame achieved by Lena Horne, who was the first African American actress to sign a contract with MGM in 1942.²⁸ It must be noted however, Horne had a very short film career and was often passed over for roles that were given to white actresses. What producers deemed acceptable about her was that she was extremely thin, had straightened hair, a very small nose, and very light skin because she was multiracial. Both of her parents and all four of her grandparents were also light-skinned and multiracial. She was just acceptable enough in the North, but in the South her parts were easily cut out of movies because she did not have starring roles in major films, and was always some club performer for white folks in the movies in which she appeared. Most importantly, the Hays Code forbid interracial relationships, and being that all leading men were white, she was never allowed to be a leading lady because of this code.²⁹

Another counter argument could dispute the fact that women are the only ones in front of the camera who are faced with prevailing pressures to fit into narrow expectations of beauty. Perhaps male actors also feel pressures to fulfill some physical expectations on the big screen. To the extent that they must not be feminine, yes, that may be the case. Yet that is generally where the pressure stops for men, and of course it is more revealing of prevailing gendered prejudices than of anything else. Yes, men who freely choose to be in action movies may have to work hard to stay in excellent shape; but by comparison to women, they can have longer careers once they are completely out of shape or bald, and still be revered and awarded for their skills and craft, usually

²⁸ Rudolph P. Byrd, *Generations in Black and White* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 88.

²⁹ Megan E. Williams, "Lena Not the Only One," *American Studies* 51, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 59.

portraying more complex characters as well. The hyper violent masculine superstar, Sylvester Stallone, only had plastic surgery by choice and because of an injury he sustained the day of his birth. He gained weight for a role in a single movie, *Cop Land*, after decades of cementing his look as an incredibly athletic superhuman, and still he was a hero in that story. By contrast, when the personified ideal of a Hollywood beauty like Charlize Theron gains weight and makes herself look plain, it is only to play a serial killer, as in *Monster*. When it comes to women characters, being ugly or simply average means being a villain; or at the very least it means being the lonely girl in school who does not receive the attention of a man.

The consequence of having men decide how everyone looks at women is that it robs women of their power to identify and present themselves as they see fit, in accordance with their own varied life experiences and their own desires. The lasting impact of Hays' Code is that intentionally or not, it reinforced the ideals of a patriarchal society. The assumption made by male movie producers after the code—that most men preferred to gawk at beautiful women—may have been based on primal instincts going back before the invention of movies and they had profits in mind. Yet the figurative shrinking of women's separate sphere on camera limited the role models that younger generations were exposed to and could emulate. Young girls may not become what they cannot see, and our generation seems to be more aware of that, as more women are shown on camera in recent decades to be heroes or to be as complex as men, and not always overtly sexualized. Movies with nontraditional depictions of women create huge profits for studios, and there is a clear reversal to the repression begun in the middle 1930s. Religious moral tales were understood by proponents of the censorship code, but movies which critiqued society's ills by showing decadence and corruption were not given the same credit, not interpreted as they should have been, and misunderstood. The Code was an outside influence that led to an absolute patriarchal Hollywood, which today is being challenged from the inside, especially with the Me Too Movement. Because of

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the current movement encouraging and empowering actresses, it is likely the male dominance of Hollywood will continue to shift towards an overdue balanced environment, and productions will reflect this.

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