

# Sofia Coppola's Camera and its Gaze

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Sofia Coppola deals in atmospheric filmmaking. Her camera lingers on things we might otherwise see as mundane, and moves languidly from one object to the next. Sunlight struggling to make its way through the leaves of a tree and face-to-face shots of characters underwater are some of her visual trademarks. Coppola's characters are in transitional moments in their lives—they exist in liminal spaces—and Coppola's visual style communicates their sense of being uncertain and overwhelmed, surrounded by material things. “[H]er speciality,” writes Anna Rogers, “is visually mapping the world of someone who is lost in his environment” (44). The camera doesn't necessarily explore the inner workings of these languid characters, but instead explores their external world—languidly.

Yet for all its careful calculation, Coppola's filmmaking is routinely criticized as frivolous and shallow: all style and no substance. She is an incredibly divisive filmmaker. She often makes films about seemingly shallow people, to be sure, and she makes no attempt to soften or make sympathetic such characters. Rather, she reveals through her filmmaking the limitations and subjectivity of the traditional camera. Sofia Coppola's is a feminine camera that actively engages and subverts the male gaze as defined by Laura Mulvey. Though Coppola's female characters are often liminal creatures within the context of their own stories, they are far from passive in terms of *how* their stories are told. Or, as Pam Cook puts it, “in Coppola's film, style is substance” (40).

Laura Mulvey deconstructs the roles of female characters in film in her influential 1975 essay, “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema.” She argues that women in film are objectified and made passive through the audience's identification with the on-screen male actors and by the masculine camera itself. She writes, “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*” (832), thus making women the “bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (834). Coppola's women are very much on display, but they are not, as Mulvey insists they must necessarily be, coded for the erotic impact of the audience. They are also imminently aware that they are being looked at, and many of them actively (though wordlessly) challenge the gaze of the camera. The camera thus becomes a stand-in for society's gaze. However, we are meant not to identify with the gaze of the camera, which attempts to judge, but with the glassy-eyed gazes of Coppola's protagonists, who are struggling to find their place in the world.

Coppola's women often indulge themselves in excesses—pastries, shoes, melodrama—to fill the void created by “the absence of a desired object when desire becomes almost an imperative” (Smaill 158). That is, these women know that they are supposed to aspire to something, but they don't know what. Their lives become inundated with vapid, material things: an essentially feminine excess. These characters, one critic writes, “all struggle with expressing feminine agency in some form” (Kennedy 41). So although Coppola's characters live in worlds that value shallow

things, they are not necessarily shallow for pursuing such things themselves. They are searching for meaning, but haven't a clue where to find it.

Through an examination of each of Sofia Coppola's five feature films, I will argue that her films are not only in conversation with Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, but that Coppola works to subvert this concept by having her characters challenge the camera. Sofia Coppola thus asks her audience to question their participation in the gaze.

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### ***The Virgin Suicides* (1999)**

On the face of it, it would seem that *The Virgin Suicides*, based on the 1992 novel by Jeffrey Eugenides, would fail any measure of women having agency in their own stories. After all, this story of the five Lisbon sisters who, mysteriously, all committed suicide, is relayed by a male narrator. (More accurately, the story is told by a collective narrator—the book uses the pronoun “we.”) The girls are transformed into goddesses by the obsessive boys who tell their story, and they have little voice in telling it.

But *The Virgin Suicides* cleverly reveals the limitations of the male observers in telling women's stories. These boys are not objective narrators. In the first few minutes of the film, the youngest girl is carted off to the hospital after her first suicide attempt. While she rests in bed, a doctor (his back to the camera) asks her, “What are you doing here, honey? You're not even old enough to know how bad life gets.” Her answer is immediate and confident: “Obviously, doctor, you've never been a thirteen-year-old girl.” In this exchange, the doctor asks the question that is likely resting on the lips of every audience member. He is the Spectator, the stand-in for the audience in this moment. The girl's answer to him, then, can be read as a near-direct challenge to the audience. You cannot judge or understand me, says the girl. All you can do is try to feel my pain.

Moments later, the film's title appears in elaborately feminine handwriting, the “i”s dotted with tiny hearts. The ethereal face of Lux, the eldest Lisbon sister (played by Kirsten Dunst), fades in over the title, and she winks—she *winks!*—directly at the camera. While the Lisbon girls' story is not told from their perspective, the story is covered by their fingerprints. Moments like the one where the youngest girl challenges her doctor and where Lux winks knowingly at the camera are direct challenges to the males who presume to tell their story.

The male narrator admits that “we” will never understand the mystery of the Lisbon girls, try as we might to solve the puzzle. This narrator (and our guide through the story) owns up to his insufficient knowledge. The only way to truly understand what happened would be to get inside the girls' heads, which is beyond the scope of the boys' collective gaze—and Coppola's camera.

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### ***Lost in Translation* (2003)**

2003's critically acclaimed *Lost in Translation* follows two lonely people, both in crisis and searching for meaning, as they meet in a Tokyo hotel. The first is aging actor Bob Harris (played

by Bill Murray), who is in the city to film a whiskey commercial, and the second is Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson), a recent philosophy graduate who is in Tokyo to accompany her photographer husband. The two are underwhelmed by the excessive culture all around them. In his article “There is Nothing *Lost in Translation*,” Todd McGowan writes of their relationship, “they see absence where others see excessive presence” (McGowan 58). There are several shots of Bob and Charlotte gazing listlessly out of cab windows as the garish rainbow lights of myriad advertisements are distortedly reflected over the glass that separates them from the city. Bob and Charlotte literally cannot connect with these excesses, nor can they even comprehend them fully. They are isolated from the city and the culture of excess.

Like Coppola’s first feature, *Lost in Translation* also opens with a sequence that subverts Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze. A long shot— very long, at thirty-six seconds—of Scarlett Johansson’s “panty-clad rear end” (Kennedy 41) would seem to be, by definition, reflective of feminine passivity objectification. “What is interesting about this shot,” writes Todd Kennedy, “is that it lasts so long as to become awkward—forcing the audience to become aware of (and potentially even question) their participation in the gaze” (45).

But as the film continues, the audience is repeatedly asked to gaze *with* her, not *at* her. Charlotte spends much time gazing out the window of her hotel room, and the camera is repeatedly positioned ever so slightly behind her. We cannot see the object of her gaze through her perspective nor can we objectify her. We merely notice her gaze and how it differs from that of the camera. Charlotte manages to avoid the camera’s direct gaze initially, and ironically, the middle-aged Bob is (somewhat unwillingly) the exhibitionist on whom we focus our gaze. Fascinated bystanders gossip unseen about Bob’s identity as he sits at the hotel bar, and we are privy to their conversation. Bob is objectified by strangers throughout the film, while Charlotte passes through various conversations and situations almost invisibly. This contrast inverts Mulvey’s assigned gender roles and shows that men be objectified, and women can be makers of meaning. The confrontational opening shot is a direct challenge to Mulvey’s way of looking at men and women, and the film that follows explores another possible view.

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### ***Marie Antoinette* (2006)**

Sofia Coppola’s revisionist take on Marie Antoinette is, as Todd Kennedy puts it, “not so much concerned with a ‘realistic’ depiction of a historical figure; instead, the film is concerned with making the audience aware of the degree to which the female protagonist is defined and constrained by the image—and with it identity—imposed upon her both by her society and the society and the film itself” (Kennedy 45). Again, Coppola is exploring the construction of identity and image, and their points of intersection.

The film, like *Lost in Translation* and *The Virgin Suicides*, opens with a subversion of Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze. Kirsten Dunst’s young Marie Antoinette, semi-dressed, is reclining luxuriously on a chaise longue while a servant massages her foot. She drags a finger down the tiers of a puffy pink- iced cake and then sharply turns her head to the camera, as if she’d suddenly become aware of it. Her challenging look almost says, “What are you looking at?” (Kennedy 48).

But just as suddenly as she acknowledges the camera, she becomes bored and, it seems, allows the camera to stay. This opening shot establishes both the conversation and the tension between character and camera.

When the queen-to-be first comes to Versailles, she receives an extended lesson in court manners. Naked, and standing awkwardly before her many servants, she is told that she is not allowed to dress herself, or even reach for any clothing. She must wait for the highest-ranked person in the room to dress her, but, of course, individuals of increasingly higher rank enter the room one-by-one during the dressing process. “This is ridiculous,” she mutters in a 21st-century drawl, hinting at her alignment with a modern audience. Marie Antoinette’s lack of agency is diegetic, and not imposed on her by the camera. In fact, the camera is positioned behind Marie, which forces the audience to “focus their attention on the women who stare at her rather than focus on Marie’s naked body” (Kennedy 52).

Sofia Coppola’s Marie Antoinette is not a particularly sympathetic creature—she is, if anything, a self- and fashion-obsessed teenager—but that is not the point. “[W]e are not invited to decide whether she is good or bad. Rather, we are encouraged to respond on an emotional level to her situation” (Cook 37). As an audience, we are also made to look upon those who gaze at (and judge) Marie Antoinette and realize, perhaps, what it is like to be an object of this harsh gaze. And as the opening shot reminds us, we cannot always trust the lenses through which we are shown the world. Coppola makes a strong case here for the subjectivity of storytelling. As she draws attention to this subjectivity, Coppola casts a light on the subjectivity of a camera’s gaze as well. Because the camera’s gaze can be both so fickle (in the shifting of perspective) and so inflexible (in the failure to show the *right* perspective), it cannot be married to the male gaze—at least not in Sofia Coppola’s world.

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### ***Somewhere* (2010)**

*Somewhere*, like *Lost in Translation*, features a male protagonist, but the film is not necessarily from his perspective. In many ways, it is *about* a particular man’s gaze, from which the audience’s gaze is divorced. Johnny Marco is an aging movie star who is submerged in the superficialities of Hollywood life, but he finds no pleasure or engagement from this shallow sensory overload. So much around him seems to exist to give him pleasure, yet he finds none. His point of view is challenged when his 11-year-old daughter Cleo is sent to live with him.

The film’s first fifteen minutes are nearly without dialogue, which forces the audience to put their attention on the image: its meaning and its veracity. In two extended sequences, a pair of identical twin pole-dancers come to Johnny’s hotel (toting their own collapsible poles) to entertain him. In both scenes, the women are awkwardly framed by an unmoving camera; various parts of their tanned bodies are frequently out of view. They smile searchingly at the middle-aged movie star outstretched on his bed, but his eyes are vacant. The girls here are so pathetic as to be sympathetic: they search for meaning where there is none. The fact that the camera, meant to represent Johnny’s perspective, ungraciously lops off their twisting heads and arms reveals just how myopic and nonrepresentative of reality our protagonist’s gaze is. His gaze is divorced from the audience’s.

In a counterpoint to the twin performances by the identical strippers, Johnny, when first looking after his daughter for the weekend, watches her long-form ice skating routine. The subdued blue of her soft, feminine leotard and her pale skin are in stark contrast with the bronzed bodies and garish outfits of Johnny's pole-dancing twins. Johnny's gaze wanders at first, his attention on his phone and the million other stimuli in his life, before finally focusing in wonder at his daughter. But unlike the scantily clad strippers, the prepubescent Cleo never looks into Johnny's eyes. She has no desire to mold her performance to his expectations. For the moment, at least, she exists outside of the sexualizing male gaze.

Both of these sets of performances are in direct contrast with Laura Mulvey's conception of female bodies in performance on film. Mulvey argues that women in film are often (conveniently) placed in the role of performer so that the contrivance of their bodies being the subject of the camera's gaze is minimized. But even though both the pole-dancers and Johnny's daughter are females in performance, *Somewhere* argues that the male gaze is insufficient in capturing their experiences. The unnamed strippers try and fail to appease the male gaze, while Cleo, on the other end of the spectrum, is shown to be impenetrable to it. While the camera may mimic Johnny's gaze (Kasna), it does not endorse it.

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### ***The Bling Ring* (2013)**

*Marie Antoinette*'s themes of feminine excess and the vapidness of celebrity culture reemerge in 2013's *The Bling Ring*. Based on the true story of a group of upper middle-class California teens who, obsessed with celebrity lifestyle, start robbing the homes of the people whose lifestyles they covet, *The Bling Ring* is a story of images. The protagonists are deeply (or perhaps shallowly) concerned with images, and variants of the question "How does this make me look?" pervade the film. The only gaze that matters to the ring of petty thieves is their own; they absolutely reject any external gaze. The most sympathetic character, a new kid in school named Marc, is introduced in a shot where he's staring into his full-length mirror, trying to decide on an outfit. He's every bit as shallow as the girls he'll fall in with.

Selfies and mirrors play a critical role in *The Bling Ring*. They serve as a way for these characters to construct their own image, and the selfies, as posted on Facebook, are intercut with the rest of the film. They are given equal weight to the intercuts of TMZ snapshots, perhaps speaking to these characters' delusions of grandeur. In multiple scenes, characters even use their webcams as mirrors, emphasizing both their narcissism and lust for fame. Through the Hermès handbags and spikey Louboutin pumps they steal and wear out the door, these Hollywood burglars fashion fantastic identities for themselves. Through the snapshots they steal with their iPhone cameras and upload online, they hijack Coppola's camera and attempt to create their own images in a void.

Much like in *Marie Antoinette*, we are not invited to pass judgment on these characters. Coppola's camera is, for the most part, completely restrained. The most memorable shot of the film involves a long take and a slow, slight zoom in on B-list celebrity Audrina Patridge's glass-walled house as two members of the bling ring, like shadows in the night, break in and sweep up expensive goodies

as they move from room to room. It is a moment in which their identities are completely erased by the darkness, and they have, for the first time, no control in the image they project.

Only in the final shot of the movie does Sofia Coppola break the fourth wall and directly address the audience. The character who has been most successful in negotiating her own image, Nicki (played expertly by Emma Watson), uses her small celebrity to express penitence to the eager paparazzi. She sits down for an interview with *Vanity Fair* (a nod to the film's source material) and makes a talk show appearance. In that televised interview, she turns directly to the camera and says with the utmost sincerity, "You can follow everything about me and my journey at NickiMooreForever.com." And then the credits roll.

This final shot, within the context of film itself, is yet another example of Nicki working to construct her own image. However, it is the first time this image construction has gone so far as to manipulate the camera, which has supposedly been *documenting* the girls' story all along. This suggests that the camera is not as objective as one would like to think, nor is it necessarily sympathetic to the "right" people. *The Bling Ring* is a film centered on a gaggle of vacuous, fame-obsessed teens: the sort of people we'd normally expect to see punished on screen. Coppola's camera offers little insight into the girls' thoughts and does not even damn the characters by the film's end—in fact, in the final shot, the camera seems taken in with the girls. By revealing its subjectivity, Coppola has once again shed light on the limitations of the conventional camera's gaze.

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## Conclusion

Coppola's first feature is ostensibly from a masculine perspective, but the girls in the film suggest (and boys explicitly admit) that that perspective is insufficient to understanding their story. The camerawork in *Lost in Translation* suggests the limitations of traditional filmmaking in conveying feminine excess and communicates a modern ennui. The character of Marie Antoinette directly challenges the camera, which will later show her story through her eyes. The shallowness of a male gaze is revealed in *Somewhere*, and the camera in *The Bling Ring* is ultimately revealed to be contributing to the consumerist culture highlighted in the film. Sofia Coppola's films reveal the subjectivity of the camera, and the camera is indeed a character in the films she makes.

Perhaps what makes Sofia Coppola's filmmaking particularly feminine (and controversial) is that all of her characters, male and female, seem to be bearers of meaning, not makers of meaning. Or rather, Coppola's camera refuses to make explicit the meaning her characters make. Her camera is restrained, and her characters' thoughts are often impenetrable. But her characters and the camera are always in conversation, if not in outright conflict.

Though Laura Mulvey was writing in 1975, the zeal with which representations of women in film are discussed has yet to diminish. Mulvey's theory was based on the canon of talking pictures, a canon, not coincidentally, built up almost entirely by men. Today, there is still a real paucity of female filmmakers. In fact, Sofia Coppola is one of only four women to ever have been nominated for an Academy Award in directing. It is no surprise then that the way in which women are

portrayed in female directors' films is subject to especial scrutiny. And the fact the Sofia Coppola so openly invokes and plays with seminal ideas of women in film is one that deserves applause.

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