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# BEYOND THE MALE GAZE: WOMEN DIRECTORS RECLAIMING THE FEMALE BODY IN CINEMA

## *Eril Bakışının Ötesinde: Kadın Yönetmenlerin Sinemada Kadın Bedenini Yeniden Sahiplenmesi*

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines how contemporary female filmmakers Jane Campion (*The Piano*, 1993), Céline Sciamma (*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, 2019) and Chloé Zhao (*Nomadland*, 2020) reconfigure cinematic representations of the female body by challenging the dominance of the male gaze. Drawing on feminist film theory—particularly Laura Mulvey's concept of visual pleasure, Teresa de Lauretis's notion of gender as cinematic technology and bell hooks's oppositional gaze—the study analyzes how these directors construct alternative visual regimes rooted in embodiment, reciprocity and realism. Through close readings of camera work and narrative strategies, the article argues that these films articulate a feminist cinematic language that reclaims female subjectivity, desire and agency while challenging normative ideals of beauty and spectatorship.

**Keywords:** Female Gaze, Male Gaze, Feminist Film Theory, Subjectivity, Representation.

**ÖZET**

Bu makale, çağdaş kadın yönetmenler Jane Campion (*The Piano*, 1993), Céline Sciamma (*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, 2019) ve Chloé Zhao'nun (*Nomadland*, 2020) sinemada kadın bedeninin temsiline dair yerleşik erkek bakışını nasıl dönüştürdüğünü incelemektedir. Laura Mulvey'nin görsel haz kuramı, Teresa de Lauretis'in toplumsal cinsiyetin sinematik bir teknoloji olarak ele alınışı ve bell hooks'un karşıt bakış kavramından yararlanan çalışma, bu yönetmenlerin bedenlenme, karşılıklılık ve gerçekçilik temelli alternatif görsel rejimler kurduğunu savunur. Kamera kullanımı ve anlatı yapısına odaklanan çözümleme, bu filmlerin kadın öznelliğini, arzuyu ve edimselliği geri kazanan feminist bir sinema dili geliştirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kadın Bakışı, Eril Bakışı, Feminist Film Teorisi, Öznellik, Temsil.

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## GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Bu makale, çağdaş kadın yönetmenlerin geleneksel erkek/eril bakışı (male gaze) nasıl sorguladıklarını ve dönüştürdüklerini; bu sayede sinemada kadın bedeninin temsiline nasıl yeniden sahip çıkıp onu feminist estetikle yeniden tanımladıklarını incelemektedir.Çalışma, feminist film teorisinin kurucu metinlerinden Laura Mulvey'nin *eril bakış* kavramı, Teresa de Lauretis'in sinemanın toplumsal cinsiyet üretimindeki rolünü vurgulayan *toplumsal cinsiyet teknolojisi* kuramı (technology of gender) ve bell hooks'un *karşıt bakış* (oppositional gaze) yaklaşımı doğrultusunda, klasik Hollywood sinemasına gömülü ataerkil görsel rejimlerin eleştirel bir çözümlemesini sunmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, Joey Soloway'in *kadın bakışı* (female gaze) kavramsallaştırması ve Lisa French'in belgesel sinemada kadın öznelik ve temsiline dair katkıları aracılığıyla bu kuramsal çerçeve güncel tartışmalarla genişletilmektedir. Ayrıca, Judith Butler'ın toplumsal cinsiyetin *performatifliği* kuramı, Vivian Carol Sobchack'ın fenomenolojik izleyici yaklaşımı, Sandra Lee Bartky ve Susan Bordo'nun kadın bedeninin disipline edilmesine dair eleştirileri, sanat eleştirmenleri John Berger ve Linda Nochlin'in temsil, bakış ve sanatsal kanonlara yönelik çözümlemeleri, ve Patricia White'ın feminist ve queer sinema kuramına katkıları çalışmaya disiplinlerarası bir kuramsal derinlik kazandırmaktadır. Tüm bu düşünsel referanslar, kadın bakışının sadece bir karşı duruş olmadığını, aynı zamanda alternatif bir görsel rejim olarak nasıl işlediğini çok boyutlu biçimde anlamayı mümkün kılmaktadır. Jane Campion'un *ThePiano* (1993), Céline Sciamma'nın *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) ve Chloé Zhao'nun *Nomadland* (2020) filmlerine yönelik derinlemesine vaka incelemeleri aracılığıyla, bu yönetmenlerin kadın öznellik, arzusu ve direncine dayalı alternatif anlatı ve görsel stratejiler geliştirdikleri ortaya konmaktadır.

Jane Campion'un *The Piano* filmi, klasik Hollywood sinemasındaki kadın nesneleştirmesinden köklü biçimde ayrılarak, kadın bedenini duyusal, dokunsal ve doğal bir uzam içine yerleştirir. Başkarakter Ada McGrath, dışsal bakışın nesnesi olmaktan ziyade, içsel öznelliğiyle betimlenir. Yakın plan çekimler, yumuşak renk paletleri ve doğayla iç içe geçmiş ses-mekân ilişkileri, izleyiciyi karakterin dünyasına dahil eden bir duyumsal deneyim yaratır. Campion'un sinemasal dili, kadın arzusunu merkeze alarak görsel hiyerarşileri tersyüz eder; böylece kadın temsiline duygusal yoğunluk, özerklik ve sessiz bir direnç kazandırır. Benzer şekilde, Céline Sciamma'nın *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* filmi, bakışın yapısını dönüştürerek iki kadın karakter–Héloïse ve Marianne– arasında eşitlikçi ve karşılıklı bir görsel ilişki kurar. Erkek izleyicinin anlatıdan bilinçli biçimde dışlanması, geleneksel voyeristik çerçeveyi kırarak, kadın öznelik ve duygusal bağlılık temelinde kurulan feminist bir sinema dilini öne çıkarır. Sciamma, arzunun sadece yönünü değil, aynı zamanda nasıl temsil edildiğini de dönüştürerek bakışı tanıyan, empatik ve simetrik bir pratiğe dönüştürür. Filmdeki yavaş ritim, kompozisyonlardaki özen ve bedensel temasın bakışla yer değiştirmesi, fallosentrik sinemasal kodlara radikal bir karşı duruş sergiler. Ayrıca, zamanın akışı ve bekleyişin koreografisi üzerinden inşa edilen arzusal gerilim, filmin bakış politikasını duyumsal bir deneyime dönüştürür. Chloé Zhao'nun *Nomadland* filmi ise estetik olarak minimal, politik olarak güçlü bir müdahale niteliğindedir. Film, kadın bedenini idealize etmek yerine, yaşlanma, yoksulluk ve yalnızlık gibi deneyimlerin taşıyıcısı olarak temsil eder. Frances McDormand'ın canlandırdığı Fern karakteri, geleneksel kadınlık normlarının dışında konumlandırılır; güzellik, gençlik ya da erotizm yerine yaşanmışlık, direniş ve sade bir onur öne çıkarılır. Zhao'nun gerçek mekânlarda çekim yapması, amatör oyuncularla çalışması ve geniş planları tercih etmesi, kadın bedenini doğrudan değil, çevresiyle ilişki içinde düşünmeye iter. Lisa French'in belirttiği gibi, kadın bakışı yalnızca yönetmenin cinsiyetiyle değil, görsel anlatının etik ve yapısal tercihlerle nasıl kurulduğuyla ilgilidir; Zhao'nun sineması bu anlayışın güçlü bir örneğini sunar. Zhao ayrıca, bakışın yönünü değil, bakışın zamanla kurduğu ilişkiyi de dönüştürerek, izleyiciyi sabırla görmeye ve deneyime tanıklık etmeye davet eder. Bu üç film, sinemada kadın bedeninin temsiline dair paradigmatik bir dönüşümün altını çizer. Jane Campion, Céline Sciamma ve Chloé Zhao, eril bakışın estetize edilmiş, metalaştırılmış temsillerine boyun eğmek yerine, kadın öznelliğini, arzuyu ve yaşanmış deneyimleri ön plana çıkaran alternatif görsel diller geliştirmişlerdir. Bu yönetmenlerin filmleri, feminist sinemanın temsili geri kazanma ve görsel kodları yeniden yazma kapasitesini açıkça ortaya koyar. Mulvey'nin *görsel haz* kuramını eleştirel biçimde yeniden okuyan bu yönetmenler, de Lauretis'in toplumsal cinsiyetin sinemasal inşası fikrine karşı yeni temsil stratejileri geliştirirken, bell hooks'un *bakışı politikleştirme* çağrısına da aktif biçimde yanıt verirler.

Makale, yalnızca bu üç örnek üzerinden değil, aynı zamanda dijital çağda feminist sinemanın gelecekteki yönelimleri bağlamında da değerlendirme sunmaktadır. Streaming platformlarının sunduğu erişilebilirlik, sanal gerçeklik ve etkileşimli anlatılar gibi yenilikçi teknolojiler, sinemasal temsilin daha kapsayıcı ve deneyimsel hâle gelmesini mümkün kılmaktadır. Kesişimsel feminist yaklaşımlar aracılığıyla—ırk, sınıf, yaş, cinsellik ve toplumsal cinsiyet kimliklerinin kesiştiği alanlarda—kadın deneyimlerinin çok katmanlı temsillerine olan ihtiyaç daha da görünür hâle gelmektedir. Bu noktada, özellikle queer teorinin sinemayla kesişiminde Judith Butler'ın performatiflik yaklaşımı ve bell hooks'un ırk ve cinsellik ekseninde geliştirdiği eleştiriler de feminist sinemanın yönelimleri için belirleyici olmaktadır. Sonuç olarak bu makale, Jane Campion, Céline Sciamma ve Chloé Zhao gibi yönetmenlerin sinemada kadın bedenini geri kazanma çabalarının, yalnızca eril bakışın nesneleştirici

mirasına karşı değil, aynı zamanda daha etik, kapsayıcı ve dönüşümsel bir görsel gelecek kurma arzusuyla bağlantılı olduğunu savunmaktadır. Bu yönetmenlerin çalışmaları, sinemayı yalnızca temsilin değil, aynı zamanda direnişin, dönüşümün ve öznelliğin sahası olarak yeniden tanımlar. Bu bağlamda, kadın bakışı yalnızca bir karşı duruş değil; alternatif bir görme rejimi, etik bir izleme pratiği ve toplumsal cinsiyet normlarının müzakere edildiği yeni bir sinemasal dildir. Sinema, bu perspektiften bakıldığında, yalnızca görsel bir anlatı değil; aynı zamanda toplumsal cinsiyet politikasının yeniden yazıldığı bir direniş mecrası hâline gelmektedir.

## INTRODUCTION

In film and feminist theories, the term *male gaze* has become emblematic of the entrenched power dynamics that have historically shaped cinematic representations of women. Coined by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay *"*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", the *male gaze* describes a visual regime structured by a heterosexual male point of view, positioning women as passive objects of visual and erotic consumption. According to Mulvey, the cinematic apparatus that governs classical Hollywood cinema—through techniques such as framing, camera movements, the use of camera angles and narrative structuring—systematically reduces the female form to a aesthetic spectacle—fragmented, idealized and often devoid of subjectivity. This model of representation not only marginalizes female subjectivity but also reinforces a patriarchal visual order in which male desire becomes the default lens through which stories are told and bodies are seen.

In contrast to this dominant paradigm, contemporary female filmmakers are forging a cinematic language that challenges the conventions of patriarchal spectatorship. These directors deploy innovative visual and narrative strategies that seek to reclaim the female body as a site of agency, desire, complexity and authenticity. Rather than conforming to roles prescribed by the *male gaze*, the women in these films emerge as fully realized subjects—embodied, introspective and emotionally autonomous. Through reimagined aesthetics and storytelling, these filmmakers subvert the traditional apparatus of objectification, inviting new ways of seeing and experiencing female identity on screen.

Central to this transformative project are the works of women directors: Jane Campion from New Zealand—best known for writing and directing *The Piano* (1993) and *The Power of the Dog* (2021), for which she received two Golden Globe Awards, two Academy Awards and two BAFTA Awards; French screenwriter and director Céline Sciamma—best known for writing and directing *Water Lilies* (2007), *Tomboy* (2011), *Girlhood* (2014), *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) and *Petite Maman* (2021); and Chinese-born American filmmaker Chloé Zhao—best known for her independent films,

*Songs My Brother Taught Me* (2015), *The Rider* (2017), *Nomadland* (2020) and *Eternals* (2021). Each brings a distinct cinematic vision to the project of re-signifying the female body on screen, offering alternative modes of seeing that diverge sharply from the objectifying tendencies of the *male gaze*. Jane Campion has been widely acclaimed for her film *The Piano* (1993), which foregrounds the interior life and sensual agency of its mute female protagonist. In *The Piano*, Campion eschews the conventional portrayal of female desire as a passive spectacle and instead, crafts a narrative that is rich with sensory detail and introspective nuance. The film's visual language—intimate close-ups, evocative landscapes, a palpable focus on tactile experiences and immersive sound to construct a subjective as well as embodied female experience—serves as a powerful counterpoint to the disembodied objectification prevalent in mainstream cinema. Likewise, Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) radically reconfigures the act of looking by centering on a reciprocal exchange of gazes between its two female protagonists. Sciamma's film challenges traditional power dynamics by rejecting voyeuristic techniques that reduce women to objects for male consumption. Instead, the director establishes what many critics now term the *female gaze*, an approach that privileges mutual recognition and emotional intimacy over mere spectacle. The deliberate pacing, measured camera movements and meticulously composed frames in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* invite viewers to witness an act of looking that is as much about understanding and empathy as it is about desire. In doing so, Sciamma undermines the objectifying legacy of the *male gaze* by articulating a visual language in which the female body is affirmed as an active, expressive subject. Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* (2020) offers yet another compelling example of how contemporary female directors keep rewriting cinematic conventions. Zhao departs from the glossy, hyper-stylized portrayals that have long dominated Hollywood and instead embraces a naturalistic, almost documentary-like aesthetics. In *Nomadland*, the focus shifts from conventional portrayal of femininity, beauty and desirability to portraying an authentic, unvarnished female experience of everyday life. The film's protagonist is portrayed with a raw honesty that eschews cinematic glamour. This emerges as Zhao uses non-professional actors and real-life settings to capture the nuanced textures of her character's existence. This realistic, documentary-like aesthetic approach that centers aging and solitude not only challenges normative beauty standards but also celebrates resilience and dignity of lived female experience. Zhao's work thus serves as a reminder that the female body can be rendered with both stark realism and poetic sensitivity—a duality that defies the one-dimensional prescriptions of the *male*

*gaze*.

These films transform the cinematic grammar, illustrating how an alternative visual language can serve as a powerful tool for reclaiming the representation of the female form. Campion, Sciamma and Zhao disrupt the structures that have historically been rendering women passive and voiceless, and instead their works affirm the female body as a locus of experience, resistance and authorship. By centering female perspective, Campion, Sciamma and Zhao encourage audiences to rethink assumptions of feminine beauty, desire and identity. Their innovative techniques—from the sensory richness of Campion's compositions to the reciprocal, empathetic gazes in Sciamma's work and the unadorned authenticity of Zhao's narrative style—demonstrate that cinema can be transformed into a medium that transcends phallogocentric norms. Their visual languages—marked by introspective pacing, embodied perspective and affective depth—invite spectators to engage with the female subject on more intimate terms.

This article argues that by employing subversive visual and narrative strategies, Campion, Sciamma and Zhao dismantle the conventions of the *male gaze* and reclaim the cinematic representation of women. Their work constitutes not only a feminist intervention but a broader epistemological and aesthetic challenge to the phallogocentric logic of mainstream cinema, paving the way for a more inclusive, equitable mode of visual storytelling—one that validates and celebrates the multifacetedness of womanhood. Selected for their international scope (New Zealand, France, and the United States) and their distinct cinematic traditions, these directors exemplify how feminist cinema re-signifies femininity and womanhood—ranging from sensual embodiment to mutual gazes and aging realism—while interrogating, unsettling and reimagining dominant visual regimes.

Feminist film theory has long interrogated the dynamics of looking and being looked at in cinema. Since Mulvey's pioneering intervention, scholars have expanded upon the idea that the act of viewing is never neutral—rather it is embedded in a network of social and cultural power relations. Scholars such as Teresa de Lauretis and bell hooks have expanded the framework beyond Mulvey's initial binary formulation. De Lauretis's notion of the *technology of gender* articulates how the cinematic form itself—framing, editing and mise-en-scène—constructs gendered identities. By foregrounding the intersection of race and gender, bell hooks have advanced the notion of an *oppositional gaze*, whereby marginalized viewers reclaim their right to see and be seen on their own terms. These critical insights provide the

theoretical scaffolding through which the films analyzed in this study can be understood—not merely as narratives, but as interventions in how cinema sees and in how viewers are invited to see.

Importantly, the films of Campion, Sciamma and Zhao do not simply critique patriarchal aesthetics—they model an affirmative vision of feminist spectatorship. In emphasizing subjectivity, embodiment, reciprocity and authenticity, these filmmakers carve out a cinematic space in which the female body is not reduced to spectacle but reclaimed as expressive, desiring and agentic. By reframing how women are seen and how they see themselves, these films offer a radical re-imagining of visual pleasure, spectatorship and cinematic authorship, contributing to broader discussions about the politics of representation. Their work underscores the notion that art primarily reflects values by foregrounding art as a dynamic medium capable of challenging norms and reshaping established values. Additionally, such critical inquiry into reclamation of the female body in cinema may be seen as both an artistic and a political endeavor—it underscores the transformative potential of feminist filmmaking in redefining the boundaries of visual culture. As the cinematic landscape continues to evolve, the re-imagining of the gaze—as seen in Campion, Sciamma and Zhao—offers a roadmap for future filmmakers and scholars committed to advancing gender equity. Through their visionary approaches, these women directors demonstrate that the female form need not be confined to the roles prescribed by the *male gaze* and instead, can be celebrated as a complex, powerful and dynamic site of identity and expression. The article therefore contends that the reclamation of the female body in the works of Campion, Sciamma and Zhao represents a paradigmatic shift in contemporary cinema. By redefining how women are seen, these filmmakers are not only challenging the very framework of cinematic representation but also crafting more authentic portrayals of femininity and womanhood. Their work engenders a new visual language—one that is as politically potent as it is artistically groundbreaking—demonstrating that cinema can serve as a site of resistance, transformation and aesthetic innovation. To analyze these interventions, this study applies a feminist visual methodology that synthesizes close formal analysis with theoretical models from Mulvey, de Lauretis, hooks, Butler, Sobchack and others. Special attention is paid to the ways in which framing, gaze construction, character agency, narrative temporality and mise-en-scène work to either reinforce or subvert male-centered visual logic. Through this lens, Campion's *The Piano*, Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and Zhao's *Nomadland* are

understood as cinematic texts that articulate a counter-visuality—one that reclaims the female body as a site of agency, subjectivity and political meaning.

## 1. Theoretical Framework: Reframing the Gaze

In *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger examines how visual culture, particularly the masculine perspective, shapes gender dynamics. He argues that the phallocentric visual regime not only determines how women are portrayed but also teaches women to internalize this male-centered gaze. Women, according to Berger, are conditioned to view themselves as objects to be looked at, rendering female identities within their relation to male spectatorship. This dynamic is simply states as "men act and women appear", encapsulating the division between active male subjectivity and passive female visibility (Berger, 1972, p. 47). Building on Berger's foundation, Sandra Lee Bartky and Susan Bordo explore the ways of how this imposed gaze becomes internalized. In *Femininity and Domination* (1990), Bartky introduces the concept of "internalized surveillance," a term that explains how women, under constant social scrutiny, come to monitor and regulate their own bodies (Bartky, 1990, p. 73). This self-policing fosters a state of self-objectification that aligns with patriarchal norms. Similarly, in *Unbearable Weight* (1993), Bordo debates the cultural fixation on female appearance that reduces women to their looks (Bordo, 1993, p. 143). These thinkers illuminate the impact of visual culture on women's self-perception and autonomy, revealing how patriarchal visual norms are not merely representational but constitutive of gendered identity.

In classical cinema, the *male gaze* has operated as a dominant structuring principle, shaping both narrative conventions and visual aesthetics. Introduced by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*"* (1975), the term refers to a cinematic mode that constructs its viewing position through a heterosexual male perspective. Within this visual schema, male characters are positioned as active agents of looking while female characters emerge as spectacles—eroticized objects to be looked at and desired, fragmented for male visual pleasure. Cinematic techniques, for instance point-of-view shots, close-ups that emphasize and isolate female physical attributes and narrative alignments with male protagonists serve to reinforce a hierarchal power dynamic that privileges male subjectivity while diminishing female agency. Mulvey identifies three dimensions of the *male gaze*: (1) the gaze of the camera, shaped by the filmmaker; (2) the gaze of characters within the diegesis; (3) and the gaze of the spectator, whose position is implicitly aligned with the male point of view. Drawing on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, she contends that cinematic visual pleasure is rooted in *scopophilia* (the pleasure of looking) and *narcissism*,

renderingthe female figure into a state of *to-be-looked-at-ness* that facilitates and sustains male fantasy and control. This renders women as visual objects upon which male desire is projected and maintained. Mulvey's insights provide a critical vocabulary for feminist film theory, revealing how mainstream cinema functions as an ideological apparatus that naturalizes patriarchal values and reproduces gendered power relations.[1]

Building on Mulvey's foundational critique of the *male gaze* as a structuring principle of patriarchal visual regimes, contemporary feminist theory has increasingly shifted its focus from inversion to innovation. While Mulvey exposed how classical cinema aligns the camera, narrative and spectator with a heterosexual male point of view, more recent feminist theorists argue that resisting this alignment requires more than simply reversing its visual codes. The alternative *female gaze* thus emerges not as a direct inversion of the male gaze but rather as a radical departure from the visual, narrative and symbolic logic that underpins patriarchal representation. Linda Nochlin's analysis in *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (1988) compellingly illustrates the limitations of reversal as a subversive strategy. In her satirical reworking of a nineteenth-century erotic image—transforming a nude woman offering apples into a nude man offering bananas—Nochlin reveals how entrenched visual codes that are indeed gendered resist disruption through simple substitution. While the original image evokes female sexuality through culturally embedded metaphors of ripeness and availability, the male version registers not as erotic but rather as hilariously absurd and comic. The incongruity stems from the deep-seated ideological framework in which femininity is conventionally equated with passivity, sexual availability and visual pleasure while masculinity is associated with action, dominance and absence from the eroticized spectacle. This disparity underscores the ways visual culture is structured by a gendered semiotic system that naturalizes female objectification while rendering male vulnerability illegible. As Nochlin argues, these symbolic associations are not easily re-coded since they operate on an

[1] Worth noting, Mulvey's formulation has since been scrutinized for several theoretical limitations: critics have noted its reliance on binary gender roles, its Eurocentric framework and its implicit assumption of a homogenous, white, heterosexual male spectator, which excludes queer or radically diverse spectatorial positions. Mulvey herself later reflected on these limitations in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989), acknowledging the need for more inclusive and intersectional analysis. Subsequent theorists such as Judith Butler expanded this critical terrain by introducing the concept of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990), arguing that gender is not a fixed essence but rather a set of repeated, culturally specific performances. Butler's theory complements feminist film criticism by destabilizing essentialist understanding of identity and encouraging interpretations that recognize the fluid, constructed and context-dependent nature of gender and spectatorship.

archetypal level and as such, resist subversion. Feminist critics accordingly contend that the *female gaze* cannot be conceived as a symmetrical counterpart to the *male gaze*. As the latter is anchored in structural power asymmetries and organizing binaries—subject/object, active/passive, seer/seen—a feminist visual language must fundamentally disrupt this dichotomous logic. Rather than replicating the regimes of control and desire that underpin patriarchal representation, the *female gaze* must generate novel visual and narrative grammars that foreground female agency, affective interiority and embodied modes of subjectivity.

In response to this challenge, the concept of the *female gaze* has emerged as a transformative alternative, functioning both as a theoretical framework and a creative strategy. Rather than replicating the voyeuristic, fragmenting and objectifying logic of the *male gaze*—or simply inverting existing visual hierarchies—it privileges intimacy, reciprocity and emotional resonance. Visual pleasure is thus reconfigured not as an instrument of domination but as a site of relational engagement, foregrounding the experience of being seen rather than reducing bodies to objects of consumption. This shift from aesthetic control to affective experience positions the *female gaze* as a space of critical and artistic experimentation that resists patriarchal spectatorship and gestures toward more inclusive, empathetic and multidimensional modes of seeing. This re-conceptualization finds early and influential articulation in Patricia White's *Uninvited* (1999), which offers a sustained theoretical account of the subversive potential of the *female gaze*. White demonstrates that classical Hollywood cinema not only marginalizes lesbian desire but also paradoxically produces moments of representational slippage—unintended openings through which non-heteronormative readings briefly emerge, unsettling the presumed coherence of heterosexual narrative logic and exposing the ideological fragility of dominant cinematic structures. Within this framework, White identifies female-authored and queer cinema as a critical counterpoint to mainstream visual regimes. Rather than merely inserting women or queer characters into existing patriarchal narrative framework, White argues that feminist and queer cinema must fundamentally reconfigure the codes of storytelling and spectatorship. She identifies formal strategies such as ambiguity, fragmentation, discontinuity and narrative non-closure as key modes of disruption, challenging the linear, goal-oriented structures typically aligned with male desire and cinematic mastery. These strategies function not simply as stylistic deviations but as political interventions: by refusing narrative resolution and clarity, they create space for emotional multiplicity, fluid subjectivities and non-binary identities central to White's conception of the *female gaze*. White further conceptualizes the *female gaze* as an inherently

deconstructive force, one that dismantles the conventional scaffolding of classical film grammar— establishing shots, continuity editing, teleological plot structures and goal-driven characters—in favor of visual and narrative practices that privilege intimacy over detachment, sensation over spectacle and interiority over exposition. Unlike the *male gaze*, which fixates, possesses, objectifies and consumes, this re-imagined gaze is dialogic and relational, decentering the controlling eye of the spectator and inviting shared identification and emotional immersion. Furthermore, White's emphasis on lesbian representability foregrounds the intersectional dimensions of looking, highlighting how sexuality, race, class, ability and other axes of identity shape spectatorship. In her account, the *female gaze* is neither monolithic nor oppositional by inversion but a dynamic, intersectional framework that radically re-imagines cinematic vision itself.

Building on the counter-cinematic strategies articulated by White, Joey Soloway's formulation of the *female gaze* offers a contemporary, practice-based expansion of feminist visual theory. In their 2016 keynote address at the Toronto International Film Festival, titled "The Female Gaze", Soloway translated complex theoretical paradigms into embodied filmmaking practices, revitalizing feminist debates on visuality. Rejecting the notion of the *female gaze* as a binary inversion of the *male gaze*—a move that risks reproducing existing power structures—Soloway re-conceptualizes it as a radical re-imagining of visual storytelling grounded in empathy, subjectivity and relationality. They define the *female gaze* as "feeling seeing": an embodied, emotionally immersive mode of spectatorship and authorship that seeks not merely to observe but to make felt the affective texture of seeing and being seen (Soloway, 2016, 17:32). As Soloway explains, "the female gaze… is about using the frame to share and evoke a feeling of being in feeling" (Soloway, 2016, 17:55). This formulation rejects the voyeuristic distance and objectification in favor of intersubjective exchange, emphasizing cinema's capability to mediate shared interior experience. Soloway identifies three interrelated components of the *female gaze*: first, the *gaze of the filmmaker*, marked by emotional identification rather than domination, collapsing hierarchical distance and enabling nuanced portrayals of vulnerability and complexity; second, the *gaze of the camera*, which communicates what it feels like to be seen rather than presenting bodies for visual consumption—this reorientation transforms the camera into a medium of affect; and third, the *returning gaze*, through which the filmed subject acknowledges the act of looking and asserts agency, creating space for the subject to look back, engage and thereby, resist

objectification. Together, these axes reframe the cinematic apparatus as a site of ethical and affective encounter.

In privileging vulnerability over spectacle, intimacy over distance, and emotional realism over visual mastery, Soloway's aesthetic aligns closely with White's counter-narrative vision. Through sustained close-ups, subjective framing, non-linear editing, and intimate voiceover—particularly in *Transparent* (2014–2019) and *I Love Dick* (2016)—Soloway demonstrates how feminist film grammar can embody these principles. In both White's and Soloway's work, the *female gaze* emerges not as a corrective inversion but as a fundamental reorientation of cinematic desire and form—one that makes visible the invisible, centers lived experience and re-scripts the very terms of visual pleasure. Foregrounding embodied experience—especially that of marginalized and gendered bodies—Soloway redefines spectatorship as relational engagement rather than visual mastery. Visibility, in this framework, becomes recognition rather than exposure, signaling a shift toward a feminist aesthetics grounded in care, attunement and ethical spectatorship. This affective orientation resonates with Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological account of cinema in *The Address of the Eye* (1992), which challenges disembodied models of spectatorship by insisting that film viewing is a corporeal, sensory experience. For Sobchack, vision, movement and emotion operate as inherently embodied modalities through which the cinematic apparatus mediates meaning.

Placing Sobchack's phenomenology in dialogue with Soloway's formulation deepens the theoretical stakes of the *female gaze*, suggesting that women's cinematic experiences are marginalized not only at the level of representation but also in form. Feminist filmmakers respond by developing alternative aesthetic strategies—slowness, affective immersion, fragmentation—that reject cinematic mastery in favor of embodied resonance. These strategies invite spectators to *feel with* rather than to *look at* the subject, cultivating an intersubjective and politically transformative visuality.

Extending this emphasis on embodiment and affect, Lisa French's *The Female Gaze in Documentary Film* (2021) shifts the discussion into non-fiction filmmaking, where representational politics intersect directly with lived realities. French argues that the *female gaze* is not reducible to authorship but emerges through the structuring of perspective—how visual narratives articulate women's embodied, emotional and sociopolitical experiences. As she notes, "the key marker of the female gaze is the communication or expression of female

subjectivity" shaped by a female agency, voice and perspective" (French, 2021, p. 54). French's articulation reframes the *female gaze* as a multidimensional epistemological framework, not merely a visual style or a thematic focus but a mode of engaging with the world—one that resists patriarchal visuality and reclaims cinematic space as a site of ethical and emotional inquiry. In documentary contexts, this gaze manifests through reflexive narration, collaborative authorship and an ethical commitment to marginalized voices. These formal strategies mirror Soloway's emphasis on emotional realism and vulnerability while also enacting Sobchack's insistence on the corporeality of spectatorship. French's intervention thus reinforces the idea that the *female gaze* constitutes a generative practice, producing new modes of storytelling, grounded in intimacy, relationality and mutual recognition. By re-conceptualizing spectatorship as an ethically charged, affectively engaged act, the *female gaze* offers a visual language that favors connection, complexity and care. In this way, the *female gaze* becomes not simply a critique of the *male gaze* but a transformative aesthetics of seeing, capable of r-eimagining the possibilities of cinematic vision, narrative agency and the politics of representation.

Similarly, Haileys C. Coles's thesis *Desire in Bridgerton* (2023) conceptualizes the *female gaze* as a narrative and visual mode that prioritizes interiority over spectacle. Coles demonstrates how desire is conveyed through atmosphere, micro-gestures, lingering close-ups, silence and sound rather than visual excess, fostering empathetic witnessing instead of consumption. Through the representation of diverse perceptions and emotional registers, the *female gaze* disrupts the reductive logic of traditional gendered representation, engendering characterization through introspective nuance. These strategies not only resist the teleological momentum of male-centered narratives—where women are often positioned as endpoints—but also reconfigure cinematic time around states of becoming and being rather than action and resolution. Her analysis underscores the plurality of perspectives afforded French's theorization by the *female gaze*, resisting essentialist or monolithic notions of femininity and emphasizing affective depth, subjective presence and narrative openness.

Taken together, the work of Mulvey, White, Soloway, French, Sobchack and Coles positions the *female gaze* as a formal, affective and epistemological intervention into patriarchal visual culture. These theorists foreground the *female gaze* not merely as a stylistic shift but as a radical re-imagining of cinematic grammar and re-conceptualize spectatorship as an ethical encounter shaped by embodiment, relationality and power, challenging the illusion of a universal or neutral viewer.

This framework gains historical and conceptual depth through theories of Teresa de Lauretis and bell hooks, which advance intersectional and constructivist approaches to visuality, moving beyond binary frameworks of gender and spectatorship. In *Technologies of Gender* (1987), de Lauretis re-conceptualizes gender as a visually constructed phenomenon, arguing that cinema operates as a *technology of gender*—a representational system that actively produces and regulates gendered subjectivities through form: camera movement, framing, editing, mise-en-scène and narrative structure. Shaping how audiences see, feel and internalize gender, de Lauretis views cinema as "a theoretical practice in the production of meaning" (1987, p. 2). This insight shifts the focus from content to form—from what is represented to how representation is constructed, laying the groundwork for feminist film theory's turn toward signifying practices. As de Lauretis elaborates, the dominant cinematic apparatus typically frames masculinity as active, coherent and central while rendering femininity as passive, fragmented and peripheral reinforces hierarchies through the very act of seeing. In this light, resisting the *male gaze* requires disrupting the visual and narrative codes that sustain patriarchal meaning.

Bell hooks's concept of the *oppositional gaze* (1992) further extends this critique by foregrounding intersectionality and viewer agency, particularly for Black women historically excluded from both mainstream cinema and early feminist theory. While de Lauretis and White illuminate the mechanisms through which cinema constructs gendered subjectivities, hooks interrogates how these mechanisms intersect with race and class, exposing the limitations of early feminist theory in addressing the visual experiences of marginalized viewers. In "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectatorship" (1992), hooks critiques both mainstream cinema and earlier feminist theories for their tendency to center white, heterosexual female spectatorship, thereby excluding the specific viewing positions of Black women. She argues that classical Hollywood films not only objectify women but often stereotype, or even erase, Black female presence. In response to this exclusion, hooks theorizes the *oppositional gaze*—a resistant mode of looking that refuses to passively absorb dominant cinematic codes—as not simply oppositional in attitude but as having an epistemological and political function, enabling Black female spectators to interrogate, reinterpret and reclaim meaning from visual texts that were designed to marginalize them. In hooks's words, "The 'gaze' has always been political in my life", foregrounding the historical reality that for Black people, particularly women, the act of looking is criminalized, punished, or pathologized (1992, p. 115). In this context, to look back becomes an act of defiance—a

way of asserting subjectivity in spaces that deny it. The *oppositional gaze* thus operates as a radical form of visual agency, one that challenges not only cinematic representations but also the ideological structures working behind this mechanism. Importantly, hooks's intervention disrupts the universalizing tendencies of early feminist discourse. By insisting on an intersectional lens, hooks redefines spectatorship as a situated, embodied and politicized practice, expanding the field of feminist theory to include not only the marginalized but also the invisible. Her theory thus also repositions the viewer not as a passive consumer but as an active and critically engaged subject that is capable of resisting, negotiating and transforming visual regimes. In this way, the *oppositional gaze* complements the *female gaze*'s project of visual transformation: while de Lauretis and Soloway focus on reshaping cinematic form to enable new modes of seeing and feeling, hooks foregrounds the viewer's agency, especially that of the marginalized subject, in reclaiming meaning and reshaping the politics of representation. These perspectives affirm a dynamic, plural understanding of feminist spectatorship that recognizes the fact that who is looking fundamentally shapes what is seen.

Collectively. the interventions of White, Soloway, de Lauretis and hooks foreground the gaze as a dynamic and contested site of meaning-making, constituted through intersecting regimes of power. These theories emphasize the cultural, political and affective dimensions of spectatorship, destabilizing any notion of a universal viewer. Expanding this theoretical constellation, recent scholarship has drawn on interdisciplinary insights from anthropology and cognitive science to probe the foundations of the gaze, raising questions about whether visual regimes are biologically determined or culturally constructed. Frans de Waal's studies of primate social behavior, including *The Bonobo and the Atheist* (2013) and *Mama's Last Hug* (2019), challenge essentialist assumptions about gendered dominance and visual control. De Waal demonstrates that primate societies exhibit not only hierarchical but also cooperative and empathetic behaviors—traits traditionally coded as feminine—which function as evolutionary strategies central to social survival. These findings undermine deterministic narratives that frame dominance or aggressive assertion as biologically male traits, suggesting instead that care, connection and collaboration are evolutionarily advantageous capacities. When brought into dialogue with feminist film theory, this anthropological perspective reframes the *male gaze* not as an inevitable outcome of evolutionary wiring but as a cultural construct shaped by social, historical and institutional conditions. This reframing has powerful implications: if the *male gaze* is culturally produced rather than biologically fixed, it is also open to critique, resistance and transformation. Visual culture thus emerges as a political field

in which power is not merely reflected but actively enacted and contested. In this light, feminist cinema becomes more than a site of alternative representations; it functions as a laboratory for visual resistance, where intimacy, empathy and embodied subjectivity can be explored beyond the constraints of dominant cinematic grammar. Just as de Waal's research underscores the evolutionary value of affiliation and care, feminist filmmakers and theorists advance aesthetic practices that foreground emotional resonance, mutuality and vulnerability. These practices do not simply oppose the *male gaze* but they forge new visual languages that reshape how viewers see, feel and relate.

These alternative theoretical approaches have direct implications for how films are both created and interpreted. Lauretis's conception of gender as a cultural and cinematic technology urges filmmakers to recognize how formal choices actively generate gendered meaning. This perspective calls for a departure from visual conventions that fragment or fetishize the female body in favor of storytelling practices that foreground female subjectivity and lived experience. Similarly, bell hooks's theory empowers spectators to engage critically with cinematic imagery, challenging visual codes through which race, gender and class have historically been represented. Rather than passively accepting dominant images, viewers are invited to interrogate and subvert them, opening space for resistant readings and alternative modes of identifications. Together, these interventions challenge the foundational assumptions of classical cinema. While Mulvey's formulation of the *male gaze* exposes the ideological structures underpinning dominant cinematic pleasure, de Lauretis and hooks demonstrate that such structures are neither natural nor inevitable. The gaze is historically contingent, shaped by cultural, technological and political conditions and therefore, open to transformation. De Lauretis's emphasis on cinematic form as a site of ideological production and hooks's insistence on viewer agency reveal that resistance operates both in the creation of images and in their reception.

This shifting paradigm is evident in contemporary feminist filmmaking, where directors such as Jane Campion, Céline Sciamma and Chloé Zhao mobilize feminist theoretical insights to challenge and reconfigure cinematic norms. Their films do not merely substitute male protagonists with female ones; rather, they radically re-imagine the visual, emotional and ethical structures through which stories are told. Campion's *The Piano* (1993), frequently cited as an early articulation of the *female gaze*, employs subjective framing, tactile imagery and rhythmic pacing to render female desire and agency from within. The camera

does not position the female body as object of visual consumption but attends to embodied experience—gesture, breath, silence—producing a sensorial intimacy that draws viewers into the protagonist's interior world. Similarly, Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) offers a compelling articulation of mutual desire and recognition. By largely excluding male characters and centering the reciprocal gaze between two women, Sciamma constructs a visual field in which female subjectivity is neither decorative nor peripheral but structurally central. Long takes, shared silences and symmetrical composition privilege emotional presence over narrative propulsion, allowing desire to unfold gradually, ethically and on its own terms. Zhao's *Nomadland* (2020), in turn, exemplifies the *female gaze* as a mode of ethical witnessing. Its realist aesthetic—marked by handheld cinematography, non-professional actors and ambient soundscapes—foregrounds lived experience and emotional nuance, resisting spectacle in favor of quiet attentiveness. Here, the gaze functions not as an act of possession but as an invitation to dwell with rather than look at, grounded in care, humility and empathetic engagement.

Together, these filmmakers demonstrate that the *female gaze* is not a fixed aesthetic but a pluralistic and evolving practice—a constellation of visual and narrative strategies that reconfigure the politics of looking. It may manifest as introspective or relational, disruptive or understated, lyrical or realist. What unites these variations is a shared commitment to reimagining how women are seen and how they come to see themselves on screen. Equally significant, the *female gaze* prompts a reconsideration of cinematic authorship. It challenges the model of the singular, often masculinized auteur and instead foregrounds more collaborative, horizontal modes of filmmaking, including shared authorship, participatory documentary practices and experimental narrative forms that decenter mastery in favor of mutuality and collective vision. Ultimately, the *female gaze* operates across all dimensions of cinematic production—from scripting and cinematography to editing and reception. It offers not only a critique of visual patriarchy but a creative vocabulary for resisting it. Drawing on the theoretical interventions, this framework affirms that the gaze is a site of both ideological reproduction and radical possibility. Cinematic vision, in this sense, is shaped not simply by how the screen itself is structured—whose perspectives are prioritized, whose voices are amplified and whose experiences are centered. As more women and queer filmmakers enter the industry and experiment with new visual grammars, the *female gaze* continues to evolve as a generative, intersectional and ethically charged framework. It enables a cinema in which identity is not reduced to spectacle but rendered in complexity and depth—where looking

becomes an act not of mastery but of recognition, resonance and relational understanding. In this way, the *female gaze* affirms a fundamental truth of visual culture: seeing is never neutral and how— and by whom—we see remains one of the most consequential cultural questions of our time.

## 2. Case Studies

### 2.1. Jane Campion: Female Sensuality and Subjectivity in *The Piano* (1993)

Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993) is widely regarded as a seminal work in feminist cinema, offering a nuanced exploration of female agency, desire and embodied subjectivity. The film centers on Ada, a mute woman whose piano functions for non-verbal, sensuous communication. Through Ada's relationship to music, touch, and the natural world, Campion's challenges dominant cinematic conventions by rejecting the objectifying logic of the *male gaze* and foregrounding a feminine visual language rooted in embodiment, affect, and interiority. Feminist scholars have consistently emphasized how *The Piano* subverts patriarchal norms through its thematic concerns and formal strategies. Sue Gillett (1995), in "Lips and Fingers: Jane Campion's *The Piano*," interprets Ada's muteness not as a lack but as a radical refusal of patriarchal language, arguing that her piano-playing constitutes an affective, sensual language of desire. Barbara Klinger (2006), in "The Art Film, Affect and the Female Viewer: *The Piano* Revisited," similarly observes that Campion's emotive visual style fosters a feminine mode of spectatorship characterized by introspection, slowness and emotional intensity. Elisa Bussi (2000), in "Voyages and Border Crossings: Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993)", extends this analysis by situating the New Zealand landscape—raw, immersive and untamed—as both a projection of Ada's internal world and a site of postcolonial tensions. Through this interplay, Campion interweaves gendered embodiment with broader political and colonial discourses.

Formally, *The Piano* dismantles the visual codes of classical Hollywood cinema, which, as Mulvey (1975) famously argued, position the female body as a passive object of male visual pleasure. Campion instead constructs a visual language that resists voyeuristic fragmentation. Lingering close-ups, tactile imagery and subjective framing reorient the spectator's gaze toward Ada's bodily experience. Her sensuality is articulated through touch, sound and movement—her interactions with the piano, her lover and the natural environment—rather than through erotic spectacle. These aesthetic choices resonate with de Lauretis's (1987) theory of cinema as a *technology of gender*, which posits that cinematic

form actively produces and regulates gendered meaning. Campion subverts this technology, allowing Ada to emerge not as an image to be consumed but as a subject who feels, desires and resists.

This reconfiguration is further reinforced through Campion's framing of the female body. Ada's physical presence is never eroticized in a conventional sense; instead, it is presented as a site of agency and sensorial communication. The camera dwells on gestures—the press of fingers against piano keys, the sensation of wind on skin, the rhythm of movement across sand—inviting the viewer to inhabit Ada's embodied perspective. Such tactile attention aligns with Sobchack's (1992) phenomenological account of cinema as an intersubjective, bodily experience, in which spectators do not merely observe but sensorially engage. The viewer is encouraged to feel *with* Ada, transforming spectatorship from detached consumption into affective identification.

Natural elements—wind, rain, mud and sea—permeate the film, anchoring Ada's subjectivity within a richly textured physical environment. These elements function not as passive backdrops but as active components of the film's sensory and symbolic economy, intensifying the link between female desire and material experience. As Bussi (2000) suggests, this ecological emphasis situates the female body within a broader colonial and environmental matrix, complicating reductive binaries such as subject/object or self/other. Campion's naturalism thus becomes a means of inscribing female subjectivity in ways that resist dominant cinematic logics.

Moreover, *The Piano* resists narrative structures that define female identity primarily in relation to male desire. While male characters are present, they do not control the narrative or dominate the visual field. Ada's sexuality is not mediated through a central *male gaze*; rather, the film deliberately avoids positioning her desire as an object of male spectatorship. The absence of a controlling male look enables the viewer to engage with Ada on her own terms, encountering her as a desiring subject rather than an object to be viewed and possessed. In this respect, Campion's aesthetics challenge voyeuristic modes of looking and encourage a reflective, empathetic form of spectatorship. The film thus becomes a critical commentary on the politics of looking, offering a mode of representation in which female sensuality is not exploited but rather celebrated as an expression of individual subjectivity.

This narrative and visual autonomy resonates with bell hooks's (1992) concept of the *oppositional gaze*, which empower marginalized subjects—and viewers—to look back, critique and disrupt dominant visual regimes. Although Ada is mute, she is never silent: her body, her gaze, and her music articulate a form of resistance that exceeds verbal language. Campion, in turn, constructs a cinematic space that privileges this mode of expression, urging viewers to engage in a form of ethical spectatorship grounded in attunement rather than mastery.

*The Piano* thus functions as a paradigmatic case study in feminist reconfigurations of the gaze. It demonstrates how cinematic form—camera movement, mise-en-scène, pacing and sound—can be mobilized to articulate a distinctly female experience. Rather than reinforcing dominant visual ideologies, Campion's aesthetic strategies work against them, crafting a mode of storytelling in which the female body is not displayed but inhabited, not consumed but felt. This aligns with French's (2021) assertion that the *female gaze* is defined not merely by who is behind the camera but by how female subjectivity is communicated through cinematic form. In sum, *The Piano* dismantles the aesthetic and ideological apparatus of the *male gaze* by centering a female protagonist whose sensual and emotional life unfolds through tactile, affective and cinematic means. By relocating cinematic pleasure from voyeuristic consumption to empathetic engagement, Campion offers a feminist redefinition of visual ethics and contributes significantly to the broader project of reimagining how women are seen—and how they come to see themselves—on screen.

### 2.2. Céline Sciamma: The Female Gaze in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019)

Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) has been widely acclaimed as a radical intervention in cinematic representations of how women see and are seen by one another. In contrast to the patriarchal visual logic of classical cinema dominated by the *male gaze*, Sciamma constructs a visual narrative grounded in reciprocity, mutual recognition, and emotional resonance. Rather than merely reversing the *male gaze*, the film articulates what may be understood as a *female gaze*: a mode of looking that resists objectification and re-imagines subjectivity through shared perspective, intimacy, affect and recognition.

At the center of the film is the evolving relationship between Marianne, a painter commissioned to secretly produce a portrait, and Héloïse, her reluctant subject. Sciamma eschews voyeuristic framing in favor of a visual grammar that privileges symmetrical gaze and subjective point of view. The camera does not dissect or fetishize the female body;

instead, it lingers on moments of attentiveness—gestures, silences and exchanged looks—through which desire is negotiated rather than imposed. Long takes, painterly compositions and the near-absence of non-diegetic music establish a contemplative rhythm that encourages emotional attunement rather than passive consumption. Both women are active participants in the act of seeing, rendering observation a shared and reciprocal process.

Crucially, the near absence of male characters within the diegesis creates a cinematic space unmediated by patriarchal surveillance. This absence is not incidental but central to the film's feminist project, as it allows a gaze to emerge that is not filtered through male desire or authority. In this respect, Sciamma's work resonates with bell hooks's concept of the *oppositional gaze*, which foregrounds the capacity of marginalized subjects to interrogate and reconfigure dominant visual regimes. In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the gaze becomes a site of creative reciprocity rather than hierarchical power: each exchanged look between Marianne and Héloïse is charged with meaning, fostering a bond grounded in mutual recognition and desire. Yet, this mutual gaze is not merely an aesthetic device but an ethical stance. It constitutes a decisive refusal of the objectifying logic of classical cinema as articulated by Mulvey (1975). Looking, in Sciamma's film, is dialogic rather than possessive. Marianne and Héloïse occupy shifting positions as both observers and observed, subjects and objects of desire. The gaze thus becomes a dynamic and creative process in which identity and desire are co-constructed. This reconfiguration dismantles the asymmetry of the *male gaze* and reorients cinematic spectatorship around shared agency. The viewer, in turn, is positioned not as a voyeur but as a participant in an unfolding relational exchange.

As Paris A. Spies-Gans (2020) observes in "Frictions of History and Gender in Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*," the film disrupts conventional artist–muse and active/passive binaries by presenting artistic creation as a collaborative, dialogic process. Painting functions as a metaphor for mutual becoming, as each woman comes to understand herself through being seen by the other. This dynamic aligns with de Lauretis's (1987) theory of gender as a technology produced through repeated representational acts. In Sciamma's film, vision itself becomes performative—a site through which gendered subjectivity and desire are constituted.

The film's formal minimalism—its restrained use of music, slow pacing, and narrative economy—works in concert with its feminist ethos. As scholars such as Xueyan Cheng (2023) and Jiaqi Zhang (2024) argue, these aesthetic choices intensify the film's affective

power, allowing emotion to unfold organically through gaze, gesture, and visual composition. By rejecting the rapid editing and visual excess of mainstream cinema, Sciamma cultivates a contemplative mode of viewing that aligns with the affective turn in feminist film theory. The spectator is invited to dwell, to witness and to feel alongside the characters, prioritizing intersubjectivity over spectacle. This rejection of objectification is further evident in the film's use of perspective. The camera alternates between the viewpoints of Marianne and Héloïse, enabling the viewer to inhabit their emotional worlds without imposing an external, objectifying gaze. Intimate scenes—quiet conversations, moments of artistic collaboration, or sustained exchanges of glances—are imbued with tenderness and authenticity, standing in stark contrast to the fragmented, voyeuristic shots characteristic of male-dominated cinema. The film's visual narrative unfolds as a series of reciprocal encounters rather than a sequence of looks orchestrated by an unseen controlling observer.

Beyond its formal innovation, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* engages broader feminist concerns surrounding autonomy, authorship, and resistance. The act of portrait-making becomes a means through which Héloïse asserts her individuality and reclaims control over her image. The slow pace of the film reinforces the idea that true connection and understanding take time and cannot be reduced to the quick cuts and shallow representations. By rejecting the fast-paced, exploitative aesthetics of the *male gaze*, Sciamma offers a contemplative and powerful reimagining of female intimacy. Héloïse's insistence on seeing the completed portrait—previously hidden from her—marks a refusal to be represented without consent. In this act of looking back, Sciamma stages a cinematic analogue of hooks's *oppositional gaze*, emphasizing that being seen must entail the power to see and to choose how one is seen. The visual field thus becomes not only a site of desire but a terrain of feminist resistance.

Ultimately, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* redefines seeing as a generative, affective and political act. Its reconfiguration of the gaze—anchored in mutuality, slowness and reciprocity—demonstrates cinema's capacity to resist visual patriarchy and propose alternative modes of looking. Sciamma offers more than an aesthetic counterpoint to the *male gaze*; she articulates an ethics of vision that challenges the foundations of traditional spectatorship. In doing so, the film aligns with and extends the theoretical frameworks of Mulvey, de Lauretis and hooks, showing how the gaze, when re-imagined, can become a site of agency, connection, and feminist transformation.

### 2.3. Chloe Zhao: Naturalism and the Female Body in *Nomadland* (2020)

Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* (2020) offers a restrained yet powerful intervention into cinematic representations of women, foregrounding naturalism, aging and embodied resilience over glamour, spectacle or eroticization. In contrast to the objectifying logic of the *male gaze*, Zhao advances a visual and narrative aesthetic grounded in realism, authenticity and ethical spectatorship. While less overtly confrontational than Campion's *The Piano* or Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, *Nomadland* enacts feminist resistance through quiet formal departures from dominant representational codes. Its rejection of cinematic glamour operates cumulatively rather than polemically, constituting a subtle yet radical challenge to visual patriarchy.

At the center of the film is Fern, a middle-aged woman portrayed by Frances McDormand, who adopts a nomadic lifestyle following personal loss and economic displacement. Rather than framing Fern through narratives of victimhood or sentimentality, Zhao presents her as a fully realized subject shaped by labor, memory, mobility and a deep connection to the natural world. Her physicality—marked by age and experience—is rendered with dignity and attentiveness. The camera avoids fetishistic fragmentation, instead lingering on her face, hands, and gestures as inscriptions of a life lived. As de Lauretis (1987) argues, cinema functions as a technology of gender that actively produces meaning through visual and narrative codes. Zhao's formal choices resist this technology by privileging embodied presence over stylized spectacle, thereby reconfiguring how female subjectivity is made visible on screen.

The film's hybrid documentary-fictional style—casting real-life nomads alongside professional actors and shooting on location—reinforces its commitment to authenticity and experiential truth. These choices foreground the experiential truth of marginalized communities and blur the lines between cinematic representation and lived reality. Naturalistic cinematography, combining expansive landscapes with intimate close-ups, situates Fern's body within her environment rather than isolating it as an object of visual consumption. This visual integration emphasizes resilience, solitude and relational belonging while also offering an implicit critique of capitalist individualism. As Randy Laist (2024) argues in "New Materialist Freedom in Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland*," the film proposes an alternative model of identity and freedom grounded in mobility, interdependence and ecological attunement rather than accumulation or rooted domesticity.

In this respect, *Nomadland* resonates with bell hooks's (1992) concept of the *oppositional gaze*—a mode of looking that refuses dominant visual regimes and their hierarchies of value. While hooks theorizes spectatorship from the position of Black female viewers, her insistence on ethical and resistant looking parallels Zhao's refusal to aestheticize or commodify the female body. Fern is not presented for visual mastery; she is observed with attentiveness and care. This ethical orientation aligns with Soloway's (2016) articulation of the *female gaze* as *feeling seeing*—a mode of spectatorship rooted in presence, emotional resonance and interiority. Zhao's gaze invites viewers into a shared act of looking that foregrounds empathy rather than control.

A central dimension of the film's feminist intervention lies in its treatment of aging. As Jing and Yuan (2022) observe in "Aging, Gender and Self-construction: An Analysis of 'Elderly Women' Image in Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland*," the film offers a rare and poignant engagement with aging, precarity, and gendered invisibility. McDormand's unadorned face becomes a visual archive of endurance and lived experience, standing in stark contrast to the idealized and youth-centered representations of women prevalent in mainstream cinema. By embracing the marks of time and refusing cosmetic idealization, Zhao challenges dominant beauty norms and redefines feminine strength as emerging from survival, memory and resilience rather than desirability. This reframing recalls feminist critiques of the broader patriarchal signifying system that equates female value with youth and visual appeal. In *Nomadland*, the female body is not an object of erotic spectacle but a vessel of history and meaning. Zhao thus extends the critique of phallocentric cinema by demonstrating how the female body can signify autonomy, dignity and lived experience outside conventional erotic frameworks. By reframing the female body through naturalism, *Nomadland* implicitly critiques the commercial imperatives that have long dictated women's representation in film. The beauty industry's emphasis on youth and perfection is silently but powerfully challenged by Fern's unedited physical form. Her rugged determination and quiet grace articulate an alternative aesthetic—one rooted in endurance rather than visual conformity. In this sense, Zhao not only subverts traditional beauty standards but also expands the representational possibilities for female characters on screen. Importantly, the film resists sentimentality. Although Fern's life is marked by hardship, she is never reduced to an object of pity. Her story unfolds through understated moments of labor, solitude, loss and fleeting connection, rendered without melodrama or narrative coercion. These aesthetic choices echo de Lauretis's call for cinematic forms that construct gender differently and hooks's insistence on ethical

spectatorship attentive to marginalized lives. Zhao refuses emotional manipulation, trusting the expressive power of quiet realism to communicate profound truths.

The American West further amplifies this representational shift. Vast landscapes and open roads mirror Fern's internal world, resisting containment and control. Zhao's camera often captures her in moments of solitary reflection against expansive natural backdrops, emphasizing agency, self-sufficiency and emotional autonomy. The natural world becomes an extension of subjectivity—a space in which identity can unfold beyond patriarchal or consumerist constraints. The film's aesthetic restraint—natural light, long meditative takes and the absence of non-diegetic music—reinforces its political ethos, rejecting the affective manipulation typical of commercial cinema in favor of contemplative engagement.

Like Campion's sensual embodiment and Sciamma's mutual gaze, Zhao's naturalism functions as a feminist strategy that privileges presence, agency and authenticity without resorting to visual excess. Here, the female body becomes not spectacle but narrative conduit—a medium through which vulnerability, endurance and transformation are expressed. In its commitment to realism, *Nomadland* offers both an aesthetic and political intervention, reclaiming female subjectivity through authenticity and emotional truth. Ultimately, *Nomadland* demonstrates that the *female gaze* can manifest not only through narrative perspective but through form, production ethics and modes of spectatorship. Alongside Campion and Sciamma, Zhao challenges the visual economies that shape cinematic gender representation, offering an alternative vision grounded in empathy, interdependence and ethical presence. Her work affirms that feminist cinema, at its most powerful, re-imagines not only how women are seen, but what it means to see.

## CONCLUSION

The films examined in this article—*The Piano* (1993), *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), and *Nomadland* (2020)—demonstrate how contemporary women filmmakers are actively reshaping cinematic representations of the female body by subverting and reconfiguring the established male-centered gaze. Each film deploys distinct aesthetic strategies to resist objectification, foreground female subjectivity and cultivate alternative modes of spectatorship grounded in empathy, interiority and agency. Jane Campion's *The Piano* reorients cinematic attention toward female sensuality and embodied experience. By integrating Ada's body into the elemental textures of her environment and emphasizing tactile, sensory engagement, Campion departs from the fragmented and voyeuristic framing

characteristic of classical Hollywood cinema. The film invites viewers into a woman's interior world, privileging emotional depth and expressive presence over visual consumption. Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* extends this feminist intervention through the careful construction of a mutual gaze between Marianne and Héloïse. The deliberate exclusion of a male spectator and the film's sustained attention to reciprocal looking dismantle the asymmetry central to the *male gaze*. Rather than inverting visual power relations, Sciamma establishes an egalitarian visual economy rooted in empathy, mutual recognition and emotional reciprocity. Desire here is not imposed upon a passive object but co-created between active subjects, transforming cinematic vision into a dialogic exchange. Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* broadens this reimagining through its commitment to naturalism and ethical realism. Frances McDormand's portrayal of Fern is stripped of glamour, sexualization and narrative spectacle, foregrounding aging, labor, solitude and resilience as dimensions of lived female experience. Through the use of non-professional actors, real locations and an unhurried visual rhythm, Zhao elevates everyday embodiment as a site of dignity and meaning. Aging and imperfection are reframed not as deficiencies but as markers of endurance and autonomy, challenging dominant beauty norms and expanding the representational possibilities of womanhood in contemporary cinema.

Taken together, these films underscore the transformative potential of the *female gaze* to generate new cinematic languages. They resist inherited visual codes and instead present women as subjects of desire, agents of narrative meaning and participants in ethical relations of looking. Whether through the sensorial intimacy of natural landscapes, the reciprocity of a shared gaze, or the realism of embodied labor and aging, these works articulate alternative frameworks for spectatorship, desire and identification.

Situated within a broader theoretical lineage—drawing on Laura Mulvey's foundational critique of the *male gaze*, Teresa de Lauretis's conception of cinema as a *technology of gender*, and bell hooks's articulation of the *oppositional gaze*—these films emerge not as reactive correctives to patriarchal visual regimes but as proactive interventions. They demonstrate that the gaze is neither natural nor universal but historically contingent and therefore open to reconfiguration. Campion, Sciamma, and Zhao engage viewers in an ethical and affective restructuring of cinematic vision, revealing new possibilities for how subjectivity, intimacy and power can be represented on screen.

Ultimately, these works function both as critiques of entrenched visual traditions and as blueprints for the future of feminist cinema. They affirm that the *male gaze* is not inevitable but constructed—and thus dismantlable through conscious aesthetic and narrative choices. By reimagining how women are seen and how they see, these filmmakers contribute to an evolving feminist cinematic discourse that reshapes the politics of representation. Feminist cinema, in this sense, does not merely challenge how women have historically been viewed; it redefines the very act of seeing, opening the screen to new ways of imagining selfhood, relationality and visual ethics.

Looking forward, the future of feminist filmmaking appears increasingly expansive. As digital technologies and global streaming platforms continue to democratize production and distribution, a wider range of voices is poised to influence visual culture. Intersectional approaches attentive to race, class, sexuality, age and ability promise to further enrich feminist film discourse, while emerging media forms—such as virtual reality and immersive storytelling—offer new opportunities to disrupt hierarchical modes of spectatorship. Together, these developments suggest a cinematic future in which the gaze is increasingly plural, embodied and relational, grounded in empathy, plurality, inclusivity and ethical engagement.

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