Dependent Women and the Male Gaze in Fictional Domestic Violence Films

Jessica Akiona

English 370

Spring 2014

Films that act as catalysts for social change and generators of compelling messages thrive within American media. Audiences enjoy watching heroes journey through various struggles and conquer people or things that hinder the main characters from achieving their respective personal goals. One favored theme within film is a woman who suffers from abuse inflicted by a male partner, while she prevails over her abused state and does not let this misfortune destroy her life, but rather lets it uplift her, resulting in more independence. One may watch films like Enough (2002) or Sleeping with the Enemy (1991) and consider the lead female characters as heroic and independent women who do not allow their abusive partners to hinder them in life any longer. However, while all of these characters seem to portray independence, they lack it; they are only capable of conquering their ex-husbands or ex-boyfriends through the help of another male character. When a film is directed, written, or produced by a male, the female characters are subject to the male gaze; thus, their role within the movie becomes passive and objectified, causing them to become heroes as delineated through their relationship with men.

Feminized male film genres are at the forefront of the male gaze and establish female characters as dependent on their male counterparts. Rikke Schubart, in her book, Super Bitches and Action Babes, first discusses the male film genre: “The term acknowledges two things: first, that films with female heroes are written by men, produced by men, directed by men, and intended for a male audience; second, that the ‘heroic’ nature of the protagonist in male film genres is mythologically, psychologically, and culturally designed to function as a role model of masculinity” (9). The female characters within male film genres are subject to the male gaze, written in accordance to the point of view of the male(s) behind the creation of these films. However, a male film genre is feminized when it is overrun by women (Schubart 10). When women invade a male film genre, they are still subject to the male gaze and while these films seemingly place women within positions of valor, their characters are still constructed around the men in the film. Schubart quotes Jeanine Basinger, stating that feminized male film genres allow “women a chance for freedom and heroism but also maintains a status quo in which the women themselves cannot, for example, win the war, only wait for the men to win it for them” (10). Consequently, women will appear as the heroes in these films, but only as defined by their interactions with the male characters.

When focusing on films with subjects such as women leaving situations of domestic abuse, these characters can stand out as inspirational role models, showing that it is possible to leave such dire circumstances. However, women in male film genres, especially fictional accounts focused on domestic violence, rarely escape their tragic state on their own. “They depend on men for education, help, fatherly advice, weapons instruction, and sensibility training” (Schubart 30). Sure, the women in these films are able to overcome their abused condition, but only with the help of men. These films belittle the notion that women can triumph solely on their own, but rather state that women can only gain peace and security if a man helps them. The male gaze thrives, for not only do the female characters receive help from men, but they also want it. Furthermore, beautiful actresses typically play these roles, existing as objects of desire and of the male gaze.

To comment further on the male gaze, Laura Mulvey, in her article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” discusses the role of women in film as passive objects, lacking their own meaning due to the male gaze. The male gaze discusses Woman as an “image” and Man as the “bearer of the look” (Mulvey 837). Because of this, “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 837). Men want to be the savior, helping women in difficult situations; men want to be the reason why women can succeed—the reason specific meaning exists in women’s lives. The woman’s role in the film will be built around the perspective of the male writer, director, or producer. Mulvey states that “Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which the man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of Woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (834). Taking this into consideration, the women in the films mentioned become heroes not because they create that image for themselves, but rather because the male characters within the film cast that connotation onto them, which ultimately stems from the creative male perspective behind the film.

The film, Enough, is directed by Michael Apted, most renowned for his affiliation with The World is Not Enough (1999), The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader (2010), and Nell (1994). The film is also written by Nicholas Kazan, most recognized for his contribution to Matilda (1996). Enough follows the life of Slim (Jennifer Lopez), a wife and mother who is abused by her husband, Mitch (Billy Campbell). Slim decides to leave, but her crazy husband will not let her go without a fight. Slim is portrayed as a strong female lead. Not only does she leave her abusive situation, but she also takes physical control and beats Mitch just as he had beaten her, all in an attempt to gain her own sense.
of control. The downside is that Slim fights back only because she receives help from three male characters in the film—a self-defense trainer (Bruce A. Young), her father, Jupiter (Fred Ward), and Joe (Dan Futterman), an old flame. Joe offers his apartment for her to hide out in and physical protection from the goons that go there looking for her. Jupiter sends Slim money after being threatened by Mitch’s gang, and the self-defense trainer teaches her all the moves necessary for physical combat with Mitch that ultimately ends in his death through her act of self-defense. The only female supporter she has is Ginny (Juliette Lewis), but her help is quite different—she offers emotional support, suggesting that Slim should leave Mitch and later in the film, takes care of Gracie, Slim’s daughter, while Slim physically prepares.

Another motion picture, Sleeping with the Enemy, is directed by Joseph Ruben, most recognized for his contribution to The Good Son (1993), The Forgotten (2004), and Penthouse North (2013). The film is also written by Ronald Bass, most renowned for his involvement with My Best Friend’s Wedding (1997). This film focuses on Laura Burney (Julia Roberts), a wife of an abusive and controlling husband, Martin (Patrick Bergin), who portrays himself as the perfect man. She formulates a plan and runs away to Cedar Falls, Iowa, later meeting another man, Ben Woodward (Kevin Anderson), who stands as a vital role in her survival when her husband comes looking for her. Martin tracks her down and finds her and Ben at a local fair. Later at their home, they find Martin with a gun, threatening to kill Ben if he does not leave. Ben leaves; however, he soon reappears, attacking Martin, but Martin ultimately knocks Ben unconscious. Laura shoots Martin and he dies shortly after. Laura relies on Ben for emotional support and physical protection. Furthermore, Ben’s distraction alone allows Laura to save herself—proving her dependence on men. Laura battles Martin, saving herself and Ben, not due to her own courage, but because she has a male protector by her side, allowing her to triumph and to be defined as a hero. Prior to this act of self-defense, Laura was alone, running away from Martin, not fighting back.

Both of these films are directed by men, thus subject to the male gaze. The director projects his perspective onto the actors/actresses, thus exposing the female characters to the male gaze of the male characters. The actors’ and actresses’ dispositions display either the power authority of males or the dependence of females. In Enough, this difference in gender can be seen in when the cook at the restaurant Slim works at says, “I love when you call me Big Poppa.” Slim shows no disgust to the comment, nor confronts the cook about his belittling words. Additionally, when a raunchy male customer directs his gaze upon Slim and flirts with her, Mitch acts as her savior, while she stands in the line of Mitch’s gaze as well. Interestingly, after this altercation, Slim is able to take a stand against the sleazy customer because she has Mitch as her support. In Sleeping with the Enemy, Martin directs his gaze upon Laura from a distance as he walks toward her on an empty beach where she sits, picking clams, as well as when he watches her getting ready for a party. At that same party, Martin’s gaze lingers as he watches her converse with others. The gaze says, “I am in control of you. I am initiating this dynamic. You are under my spell,” whether it leads to protecting a damsel in distress (Enough), making love (Sleeping with the Enemy) or abuse. Either way, as much as the female attempts to be in control, the male regulates the relationship, objectifying the woman and casting her as passive. The hero quality that Slim and Laura have is defined through their relationship with the men who come to their aid. These men are actually the heroes themselves—they save the woman from the rude man, they offer money, a home, and physical protection, and they offer knowledge to make it through the ordeal.

The female leads in each film, while seemingly stopping their abusers, are only capable of doing so with the help of men, whether it is financial or physical support, or acting as a diversion in order for the woman to triumph. This trend of inequality between genders is common in film. Jeff Smith, writer for Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy (GRIID), states in his article, “Normalizing Male Dominance: Gender Representation in 2012 Films,” “In the few movies where we see strong lead female characters, we also see them having the support of at least one male who is involved in their situation in some way where the female ends up needing their help. We rarely see any breaks in stereotypical gender roles.” Both Slim and Laura, strong female leads in their respective films, are actually quite dependent, relying on the men in their lives to help them through this difficult time in a variety of ways. In their article, “Gender Stereotypes: An Analysis of Popular Films and TV,” Stacy Smith and Crystal Cook state, “Examining over 4,000 characters across 400 G, PG, PG-13, and R-rated movies, our data reveal two types of females frequent in film: the traditional and the hypersexual” (14). Slim and Laura are far from subservient in regards to their abusive spouses, however, they are very much the traditional woman—a nurturing mother who cares about her family first and foremost. Laura, in particular, is also cast as hypersexual by her male counterpart who constantly accuses her of casting her own gaze upon men.

This gendered binary opposition is eminent in both films. Anneke Smelik, in her article, “Feminist Film Theory,” states, “The narrative structure of traditional cinema establishes the male character as active and powerful: he is the agent around whom the dramatic action unfolds and the look gets organized. The female character is passive and powerless: she is the object of desire for the male character(s)” (491). In reality, without the male characters, there would be no film. Who would the women run from if the plots were simply about their lives after escape? Where would the entertainment be in a film like that? In addition, who would offer her money, a home, or protection? Smelik goes on to discuss Teresa
de Lauretis' views, stating, “One of the functions of narrative ... is to 'seduce' women into femininity with or without their consent. The female subject is made to desire femininity. This is a cruel and often coercive form of seduction” (496). When Mitch guards Slim from the customer, he places her in a weak role—feminine and lacking individual strength. In addition, Martin's soothing tone and considerate, yet a powerful personality places Laura within the realm of femininity and when he abuses her, that only causes her to sink further into a state of submission and objectivity.

There is a twist in feminized male film genres that inhibit women from enacting their fullest potential. Sleeping with the Enemy is based on a novel of the same name written by Nancy Price and was published in 1987. There are some differences between the film and the novel, especially in Roberts' character. The novel presents Laura as very cautious and secretive, making sure not to let anyone know whom she really is. However, the film portrays Laura as a naïve individual, removing her disguise upon entering Iowa, even though she never does so in the novel. Another point of interest is Ben, the “dream guy” who acts as her savior in the film. In the novel, Ben exhibits very similar unwelcoming characteristics as Martin. Finally, in the final moments of the film, Laura goes to a carnival with Ben, something she never did in the book, always being careful to never be seen with him in public. One can observe the character Price produced within her novel—a smart woman, maneuvering through various obstacles in an attempt to keep her identity hidden and herself safe. However, Ruben radiates his male ideology through the film, casting Laura as naïve, dependent, and weak.

The most shocking difference between the film and the novel is the ending. While Martin is shot and dies in Ruben's film, Price writes Martin's death as a suicide. Martin and Ben tussle, trying to get hold of Martin's pistol that Ben had in his possession. Various characters surround them, watching Martin grab hold of the gun when:

“[f]or a second Martin shut his eyes, his pumpkin head swelling on its stem. He saw the police. He'd slapped a woman around and killed a man, and the pigs would be after him ... A man sprawled in chrysanthemums ... Sara [Laura] was falling and falling as thunder thudded down the sky now from stair to stair. Martin's head was a pumpkin blown up. It wobbled around on its little stem.” (Price 307)

The novel's Martin has a psychological break, portraying him as a man on a rampage all to gain control of the woman he loves. Martin realizes that turning back is impossible and he decides his fate: “‘They want it!’ he sobbed in Sara's arms. His clever hands had the gun. They broke the pumpkin” (Price 307). While the movie implicates Martin's death as an act of self-defense by Laura, Price deemed him as the death of himself. Perhaps the film tried to emphasize Laura as a strong figure, taking control by holding the gun and pulling the trigger, whereas Price creates a realistic notion to a story of domestic violence—sometimes the woman is not the one to defeat the man; the man is the defeat of himself.

Enough is also based on a book titled Black and Blue written by Anna Quindlen in 1998. It is a rather loose adaptation, simply adopting the skeleton of the plot—a woman beaten by her husband decides to run away with her child and begin a new life in a new town. One difference includes Slim, receiving help from her friends and family in order to run away, whereas Beth Crenshaw (the mother in the novel) receives aid from individuals who support women escaping abusive situations, offering time and resources. In addition, rather than physically battling the abusive husband in the end as Slim did, Bobby (Beth's estranged husband), breaks into Beth's new home, strangles her until unconsciousness sets in and kidnaps their son, Robert. By the end of the novel Beth is left continuing her life with a new love, Mike, while constantly thinking about her son's safety. The novel portrays another realistic vision of domestic violence—the woman does not always lead a happy life after escape. For instance, Beth's new love is not idealized, she discusses Bobby as “‘[t]asty but dangerous. Mike Riordan was the least dangerous guy I'd ever known, and every time I thought to myself, well, Fran, he's just not your type, I had to remind myself that my type was the type who left marks’” (Quindlen 213). A woman's life after domestic violence does not always have the picture perfect fairy-tale ending in which the abuser is gone forever and the mother can live in peace with her child(ren) and new significant other. Quindlen creates an ending that can be so unfortunately true—a woman forced to continue life without her child by her side because she is unable to stop her abuser.

Films focused on fictional accounts of domestic violence that exist as feminized male film genres emphasize the fact that it is possible to escape and conquer the men who abuse women and that it is possible to find a new love after a first attempt at it failed. However, these films also say that conquest only occurs when male help is utilized and that a new love interest is a necessity to start over. Additionally, the differences between the novels and their film adaptations further the notion that in these films, the male gaze connotes women as heroes through their relationships with the male characters, who technically rescue them in the end. The male character's actions are not the primary focus of each film. However, without those roles, the film would not emit the same effect. Without men, these films would simply follow a woman as she lives an ordinary life, going to work, taking care of her child, and possibly discussing her abuse to a therapist, family member, or friend. There would be no action, no suspense and no raw tension that many audiences want to see in a film. These pieces of literature focus on the inner emotions
and authenticity of a topic, whereas the films construct an entertaining plot, featuring male ideologies at work. These films do not allow women to fight back on their own and they do not suggest that women should rely on fellow females. Those who create these films shape them in a way that the male genre becomes feminized and the female characters are formed around the ideologies present in the minds of the males who write, edit, and direct these motion pictures. Instead of giving women a voice and acting as a catalyst for change, these films restrict society from a needed transformation.

Works Cited


