

# Embodying Hollywood's Hispanic Body: The Impact of the Male Gaze on Hispanic Women in Film

Hannah Lipman  
English 499  
Fall 2014

Hispanic women in Hollywood cinema have been represented by the false notion that they are hypersexual and have perfectly curvaceous bodies. The male gaze within these films is what has perpetuated this illusion. As Laura Mulvey explains, the male gaze functions in showing the women within the film "on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" (Mulvey, 40). For Hollywood, white heterosexual middle class men use the gaze. This idea of objectifying women with a white male gaze shows how racism and patriarchy is part of the film industry. One way of gauging these gender biases is by using the "The Rule," other wise known as "Bechdel Test." Kirsten Møllegaard, an English professor at the University of Hawaii at Hilo, explains one of Alison Bechdel's 1985 comic strips called "The Rule," in which one characters tells her friend, "I have this rule, see...I only go to a movie if it satisfies three basic requirements. One, it has to have at least two women in it...who, two, talk to each other about, three, something besides a man" (Møllegaard 81). The "Bechdel Test" proves useful on a critical analysis of gender biases and the understanding of the male gaze.

Several Feminist Film Theorists such as, Laura Mulvey, Simone de Beauvoir, and Bell Hooks have looked at the effects of the male gaze on women in film. What is not discussed is the impact the white male gaze has had on Hispanic women in the film industry. The white male gaze towards Hispanic women situates the gaze toward the women in a sexual and racial objectification. The impact of the male gaze can be seen in the films *Frida* (2002), *Y tu Mamá También* (2001), *Woman on Top* (2000), and *American Beauty* (2002). This paper will look at the connection of the male gaze to patriarchy in the film industry. The text *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body In Popular Film and Culture*, edited by Myra Mendible, will be thoroughly discussed to provide evidence of the effects of the male gaze on the Hispanic women in film. The female body has been under the watchful eye of the male gaze in the film industry, but it is the Hispanic female body that has been its main target of sexualization for male pleasure.

Images of both the idealized and disabled Hispanic female bodies are represented dramatically in the films *Frida* and *Y tu Mamá También*. In *Frida*, Salma Hayek opens the film playing a young sexual Frida who desires to read, paint, and have as much sexual

intimacies as possible with her boyfriend in her closet. At the beginning of this film, Frida is represented as full of life, with a body that is as youthful as the actress herself. Hayek's body seems to be a main focus in the opening of this film, with it being fully exposed and bent in imaginable ways during sex. Her body is presented as ideal, yet it also has another layer of meaning to it. The idea of "other" is fully actualized in the representation of her body at the same time. Isabel Molina Guzman, writer of *Salma Hayek's Frida*, explains:

Since it is through women's bodies that the imagined nation is biologically reproduced and symbolically maintained, mainstream U.S. representations of sexuality are articulated through a complex matrix of nationality, race, class, and gender, predominately enacted through women's bodies. (118)

Frida's body along with Hayek's body is used to represent not only a young sexualized figure but also the form idealized as Hispanic. In the film, Frida's body goes through a series of changes, which are used to show the Hispanic body going from idealized to disabled. Frida is involved in a tragic trolley accident, which leaves her disabled for the rest of the film. Although this scene is historically accurate as far as the accident happening on a trolley in the busy streets of Mexico City, the use of Hayek's body being shown contorted and artfully sprinkled with gold flakes is not. The whole scene is shot from a crane that pulls the camera higher and higher to reveal the whole accident and Hayek's sexy, yet disturbing body. It is in this scene that the idealized and disabled Hispanic form is used to show Hayek's vivacious figure. Hayek's body becomes sexually disabled during this moment.

Throughout the rest of *Frida*, Hayek's body introduces the audience to a series of sexual partners from heterosexual to homosexual to possibly transsexual. Here is where the film is set up to attract the male audience and the conservative WASP's (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) for whom the film is a means of escaping the mundane life in the United States. Ron Briley speaks to this issue in his film critique of the scene where Frida dances the tango with photographer Tina Modotti (Ashley Judd). Briley critiques, saying, "Rather than presenting this provocative lesbian dance as the action of a woman who challenged sexual convention, Frida seems primarily motivated by the desire to gain the attention of Rivera (Alfred Molina), who is provided with the gift of the [male] gaze in this male fantasy" (Briley 76). Frida's sexual life does become fore-fronted in this film and it is weaved in between Frida's artwork and her hyper-Mexican lifestyle. As Guzman explains:

Hayek functions as racial, sexual, transnational, and symbolic bridge between the representational politics of an exotic, ethnically ambiguous sexuality and a nationalistic, politicized sexuality

that threatens to transgress normative definitions of [Hispanic] femininity and sexuality, as performed by Frida Kahlo. (118)

This seems like an awful lot to ask from just one person's body. Hayek represents a feminine masculinity paired with sexual deviance. These traits are embodied by her figure through hypersexual and passionate love scenes. This is where the film pulls away from presenting Frida in a historical context, and begins to focus on what Hayek has dealt with most of her Hollywood career; her curvaceous body. Guzman writes extensively about her body being the topic of discussion in Hollywood, rather than her performance (Guzman 119). Guzman observes, "The hypersexualization of Hayek's body through the racialized articulation of [Hispanic] identity within these Hollywood texts is not surprising" (Guzman 119). The female body is widely used as a commodity for film production and instills the use of the male gaze. In particular to Hayek's body, her character is used as a sexualized ethnic spectacle, which panders to the male gaze.

The issue of the "other" is also represented in *Frida*. In several different shots, Frida can be seen looked upon by WASP's or rich Hispanic women who are there strategically to show the opposition to Frida's vibrant sexual lifestyle. This is where Hayek's body is used in a performance of hypersexuality, which is opposite to her white heteronormative counterparts. The female Hispanic body is not just presented as "other" to white women, but to white men as well. This "other" affects the way in which men see Hispanic women in film and on the streets. The impact of the male gaze does not just stop in the theatres, but is weaved into the daily lifestyle of American society. Just as men gaze upon Hayek's body in the film, Hispanic women who roam the streets are gazed upon as sexual objects. This has a devastating impact on how women are treated. Jeremy Hawthorn, author of *Theories Of the Gaze*, puts it best by saying, "I will return to the idea of the camera as metaphor of rape...I want to draw attention to the fact that voyeuristic observation of a woman by a man is not just a convenient *metaphor* for physical violence such as rape; in the real world it is often *directly linked* to and even a *prelude* to such violence" (Hawthorn 512). The idea that the male gaze is a voyeuristic observation can be seen in *Frida* with shots of Hayek from windows or overheads, which produce the feeling of someone other than the audience watching Hayek's movements and body.

The male gaze also promotes the hypersexualization and stereotypes of the Hispanic female body. This in fact seems to help boost a fake multicultural Hollywood. These issues of hypersexuality and stereotypes of Hispanic women are not just represented in *Frida*, but also in *Y tu Mamá También*. In this film the body of Ana (Ana Lopez Mercado) is used as a means to an end. Her breasts are shown several times,

as if this woman's body is the only focus of the film. This film is about the sexual exploration and the fine line between hetero/homosexuality of both Tenoch (Diego Luna) and Julio (Gael Garcia Bernal)—two young men seeking the company of this hypersexualized Hispanic woman. Mercado's body becomes the forefront of this film, but there is a sad undertone to her character. The moments when we see Mercado's character being spied on through window cracks by Tenoch and Julio as she cries is sobering and haunting. Her character is shown to have "cracks" in her personal life, which seems to be a reoccurring metaphor used in film to show the fragility and social downside of a promiscuous womanhood. Ana's emotional rollercoaster through the film gives her character a sense of something damaged or disabled. The audience does not find out till the end of the film that she has cancer and cannot have children. Ana is disabled from ever being able to produce a baby, and it is in the moments when she is playing with another character's children that the depression of this fact is written on her face. Mercado's acting capabilities, such as being able to convey in one glance the severity of living in a society where not being able to produce children renders you a broken woman, is overshadowed by the portrayal of her naked body. This re-instills the patriarchal values of society that if a woman is infertile, she is only worth having sex with.

The characterization of the good/bad girl complex in this film is another subject to be discussed. Molly Haskell, author of *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women In the Movies*, makes it quite clear why this character attribute of good/bad girl works so well. Haskell says:

The 'virgin' was a primal, positive figure, honored and exalted beyond any merits she possessed as a woman (and eventually made to pay for her 'superiority' in the professional virgins and teases of the fifties), while the 'whores', Americanized into the good-bad girl, was publicly castigated and cautioned against—and privately sought by men. (xiv)

It is the ending of this statement, which hits home for *Y tu Mamá También*. The film shows Tenoch and Julio berating and stalking/cornering Ana at a wedding, teasing her into liking their childish hormonal antics. It is as if because she plays along in the beginning with their silly boyish games of flirtation, that they compute her in their minds as the "whore," and inadvertently the film turns its focus towards a desire to share sexual intimacy with her. This battle of hormones and who can have sex with Ana first becomes the water that splits the rock between Tenoch and Julio. The male characters' behavior towards Ana is presented as being okay and natural, as if acting like a "caveman" is natural in the 21st century. Their *cavemantics* pays off and both get to sleep with Ana.

The battle of the stronger vs. the weaker sex is commenced in a role reversal in this film. Ana, Tenoch and Julio get overly intoxicated and find their way into a bedroom. They begin to have sexual intercourse, and Ana is shown giving oral sex to both Tenoch and Julio. The camera is clever in this scene. While Ana is giving oral sex, the camera zooms in to focus on Tenoch and Julio looking at each other in a romantic way. It is at this point that they kiss passionately. The scene ends in darkness and it is morning again. Both men are completely confused and scared of what happened last night, although no clues are given as to what happens. It is as if Tenoch and Julio do not know what actually occurred, but are mortified by the thought. It seems at this moment in the film that the view of focusing on Ana's body and sexuality becomes shifted to the focus of Tenoch and Julio. The questioning of their sexuality and manhood seems to be the focus of the rest of the film. Ana seems to disappear into the background. What this overall scene should be taken as is Ana's victory in the battle of the sexes. She uses her body and sexuality to push these two men to question their own sexuality. This of course pushes the boundaries of everyday patriarchal life. As Haskell states, "The yin and yangs of heterosexual romance, the power differential between the "stronger" and the "weaker" sex, are not just tricks of the movie propaganda; they have been articles of faith among writers through the ages" (Haskell xv). Here the female sex wins the battle and moves the battle of "stronger" versus "weaker" to a power struggle of sexuality. This being the most crucial and powerful point to the film gives a saddening understanding as to why Mercado's body might have been used so heavily in this film. Prior to this awakening moment, the female body and female promiscuity seemed to frame the screen, but it is now apparent that to get an audience dominated by WASPs to watch two men kiss, there would have to be a lot of breasts.

*Frida* and *Y tu Mamá También* are excellent films that show the sexual representation of women in film. Hayek and Mercado's bodies are viewed by the male gaze, which does not stop on screen. On several occasions like the Golden Globes for Academy Awards, these women can be seen parading around in lavish, tight, and revealing dresses that cling to every curve of their body. As they walk down the red carpet, flashes upon flashes of cameras taking pictures of these two women with entertainers critiquing how elegant, sexy, or revealing their dresses are for the audience. These women are conforming to the social and cultural American patriarchy just as the patriarchal sexual representation of them in film. The visual pleasure they produce is evidence that the male gaze is alive and thriving in Hollywood. As Mulvey says, "The cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, but it also goes further, developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect. The conventions of mainstream film focus attention on the human form" (Mulvey, 8). Truly *Frida* and *Y tu Mamá*

*También* were produced for mainstream cinema and the male audience's pleasure of naked women.

The sight of a woman's breasts or cleavage in film becomes a visual pleasure for the male audience. It is not that the sight of a female body is not meant for a woman to view, but that the way in which the female is produced in the film is constructed around the male gaze. This is highly apparent in the two films *Woman on Top* and *Real Women Have Curves*. Both films show the conformity to mainstream stereotypes about the idealized Hispanic body. In *Woman on Top*, Isabella (Penelope Cruz) is a vivacious, independent, tight dress wearing character, who has a TV show, called "Passion Food." Cruz, who plays Isabella, is representing a Brazilian woman who has moved to San Francisco after leaving her husband who cheated on her. Cruz's character is produced as incredibly attractive, and her cooking show, which is mostly watched by men who cannot get enough of her "plump as tomato" breasts, is used to keep this façade of the Hispanic idealized body alive. The way in which the male gaze is used in this film brings forth the racial stereotypes enforced upon Hispanic women in film. As Angharad Valdivia puts it, "Penelope Cruz make[s] sense in relation to...the history of gendered and racialized representation within the popular terrain of U.S. mainstream culture. Whereas 'blonde girl dressed in white usually signifies innocence and probity, just as dark haired women tend to signify danger and sexuality" (Valdivia 139). Cruz's tanned body and dark hair surely signify sex to the men with in *Woman on Top*. Cruz's character has so much fluidity and passion in this film that it falsely represents how women of the same style in public would be perceived. Sharon Smith, writer of the essay *The Images of Women In Film*, expresses her concerns about how women are not only represented in film, but also the impact it has on the actress off screen. Smith says:

Naturally it is possible for a woman to enjoy watching films of explicit sex acts. But out of bed the [actress's] role will be the usual: bitch, nymph, housewife, whore, essentially passive, nothing any sane woman would want to identify with. And it is the female stars whose naked, silicone-stuffed body is plastered on billboards, not the male star...The intent nowadays is not to give a mixed audience an interesting study of male-female relationships, but to work out the neuroses of male filmmaker with an ever-increasing vengeance, aimed at titillating male audiences who have the same neuroses. And in men and boys who do not already have these prejudices—it creates them. (17)

Hollywood's patriarchal society has used the male gaze as a means to not just please a male audience, but to inadvertently mold the minds of young boys and girls. The male gaze is heavily focused in *Woman on Top*,

particularly at Cruz's swaying hips and "perfectly" sculpted legs as the actress walks up and down the hills of San Francisco. She endures catcalling and whistling from men, thus allowing young boys to believe that such behavior toward women is acceptable.

The male gaze molds the minds of young boys and the way they view women. This of course is evident in *Woman on Top*, but a female audience can also use the male gaze. In the film *Real Women Have Curves*, Ana Garcia (America Ferrera) is shown being criticized by Carmen (Lupe Ontiveros), her mother. Her mother is constantly telling Ana how she should act as a woman and look like a woman. Carmen focuses on Ana's weight, making it apparent that she is too fat to attract a good man. Ana's mother uses the male gaze by the way in which she coaches her daughters to appeal to men. The long-term effects of Carmen's overpowering opinions on beauty can be seen in Ana's older sister, Estela—a seamstress and piecemaker at the clothing factory her mother works for. Estela has been whipped by her mother's tongue and silenced along the way, showing the link between patriarchy and motherhood. Like Simone de Beauvoir is quoted saying in Sonia Kruks article, "One is not born a woman, one becomes one" (Kruks 91), her mother, who has followed the stereotypes perpetuated on women in a patriarchal society, has molded Estela into a woman.

The views of family and virginity also play a key role in this film. When Carmen is berating Ana about her weight or her need to be a virgin until marriage, she is imposing her family values on Ana. As Myra Mendible explains, "[Hispanic] bodies figure as both repositories of traditional 'family values' and the purveyors of modern consumerism" (Mendible 13). As Mendible points out, Carmen is not only instilling family values in Ana, but has fallen under the modern consumerism of the U.S., but also Ana does not fall for it. She finds her curves empowering and her boyfriend finds them sexy. Ana embodies her womanly curves through dance, song, and speaking her mind. Her character seems to bring to life a quote by Mendible from *Embodying Latinidad* as Mendible writes:

"My body still responds to rhythmic beats like a reflex, despite my need to 'Americanize' and blend into my colleagues' more reserved social gatherings...even a simple act—dancing—is loaded with gendered, racialized baggage; in a single butt-shaking instant, this [Hispanic] body can resurrect a history of stereotypes, preconceptions, and prejudices" (20).

Ana uses her body as a self-expression of her views of womanhood and the idea that real women have curves, and are proud of them.

The generic framework of *Real Women Have Curves* is the Hispanic melodrama. A great deal of emphasis is put on the "Olympian" temperament of

Ana and Carmen. Both are highly melodramatic in their attempts to voice their opinions about women and family, and the struggle of mother-daughter relationship becomes dramatized. Ana Lopez, author of *Tears and Desire: Women and Melodrama in the "Old" Mexican Cinema*, explains that the "positioning of women" in melodramatic films perpetuates the ideas that women are dramatic and catty by nature (Lopez 255). Lopez looks at melodrama in context to history and the Hispanic society. In *Real Woman Have Curves*, the women are represented as gossiping mothers and catty daughters, excluding Ana. Her character is still dramatic—her passion is fueled by women's rights and the state of not being a perfect size two. The overall melodramatic feel this film gives off is of historical placement. As Lopez explains, "The rapid establishment of the specific [Hispanic]-American star system heavily dependent on radio and popular musical entertainers gave rise to melodramas," and today those older melodramas can be felt by the heightened family dilemma and the positioning of Hispanic women around gossiping (Lopez 255). Ana is shown engaging in family drama, while Carmen and other women are engaging in gossip and fostering Hispanic family values. The film is loaded with what Bell Hooks calls "cultural production;" producing a few women in society and the behaviors they enact in public and home, with the cultural values of a Hispanic community (Hooks 128).

*Woman on Top* and *Real Women Have Curves* show the orthodoxy of mainstream cinema and the stereotypes enlisted upon the idealized Hispanic body. Cruz's character embodies both the idealized and the hyper-sexualized Hispanic body, while Ferrera's character embodies an internalized self-view of the idealized Hispanic body. Both characters deal with the oppressiveness of other women's opinions and the male gaze. The two films deal with the idealized Hispanic body, and show the main characters being watched by gaze of a white male. This shows how Hollywood is producing films not only for a male gaze, but for a racial-gender group as well – the racial group being white middle class males.

The female body is viewed by a male gaze in the film industry, which has left Hollywood with a string of stereotypes revolving around the woman's body. The Hispanic woman body has been a focus of the male gaze since the early representation of Hispanics in Hollywood cinema. The male gaze has left the Hispanic body to be viewed for visual pleasure by men. The voyeurism entrenched in Hollywood towards Hispanic women has had unbelievably negative effects and has prolonged typecasting of Hispanic women. Molly Haskell says, "The big lie perpetrated on Western society is the idea of women's inferiority, a lie so deeply ingrained in our social behavior that merely to recognize it is to risk unraveling the entire fabric of civilization" (Haskell 1). The big lie perpetuated by Hollywood on the Hispanic woman's body being sexy, vivacious, perfectly curved, and temperamental, is a lie so deeply rooted in patriarchy,

that to begin to dig it up, one must get elbow deep in the misogynistic mud. The images of Hispanic women in the film industry today are anything but real. When will Hollywood learn that to pigeonhole one group of women is to pigeonhole all women?

### Work Cited

Briley, Ron. "Frida." *Film Reviews* 33.2 (2003): 75. Print.

Guzman, Isabel Molina. "Salma Hayek's Frida: Transnational Latina Bodies in Popular Culture." *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture*. Ed. Myra Mendible. 1st ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007. 117. Print.

Haskell, Molly. *From Reverence to Rape*. 2nd ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987. Print.

Hawthorn, Jeremy. "Theories of the Gaze." *Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Patricia Waugh. England: Oxford University Press, 2006. 508. Print.

Hooks, Bell. "The Oppositional Gaze." *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Ed. Bell Hooks. 1st ed. Boston: South End Press, 1992. 115. Print.

Kurks, Sonia. "Gender and Subjectivity: Simone de Beauvoir and Contemporary Feminism." *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18.1 (1992): 89. Print.

Lopez, Ana M. "Tears and Desire: Women and Melodrama in the "Old" Mexican Cinema." *Multiple Vioces in Feminist Film Criticism*. Eds. Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice R. Welsch. 1st ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. 254. Print.

Mendible, Myra. "Embodying Latinidad." *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture*. Ed. Myra Mendible. 1st ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007. 1. Print.

Mollegaard, Kirsten. "Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories And Methods." *Journal Of American Culture* 37.1 (2014): 81. Academic Search Premier. Web. 3 Dec. 2014.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Feminism and Film*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. 1st ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 34. Print.

Smith, Sharon. "The Image of Women in Film: Some Suggestions for Future Research." *Feminist Film Theory*. Ed. Sue Thornham. 1st ed. Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 1999. 14. Print.

Valdivia, Angharad. "Is Penelope to J.Lo as Culture is to Nature?: Eurocentric Approaches to "Latin" Beauties." *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture*. Ed. Myra Mendible. 1st ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007. 129. Print.