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Gender Differences in the Representation of Film and Television: From Gaze to Cultural Contexts

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Abstract. Film and television play a crucial role in shaping gender imagery and disseminating social norms. However, existing research often over-relies on Mulvey's male gaze or is limited to a single cultural context, lacking a more comprehensive comparison. This article combines gaze theory with cross-cultural analysis, using close textual reading to analyze four case studies: Stranger Things (2016) and Sex Education (2019) focus on narrative control, visual framing, and the negotiation of different gazes; Raise the Red Lantern (1991) and Barbie (2023) explore how China's patriarchal family order and Hollywood's postfeminist consumer culture shape gender representations and influence audience interpretations in different contexts. This research finds that gender differences are not fixed but are constantly rewritten through the mechanism of the gaze, receiving diverse interpretations across cultures. Narrative and visual strategies determine how women's agency is constrained or liberated, while cultural context further influences how audiences interpret these images. In other words, the meaning of gender representation is always shaped by the interweaving of gaze and context. These findings suggest that gender representation in narrative cinema is a product of both textual mechanisms and cultural context. This study not only addresses research gaps that have overly relied on the male gaze or neglected cross-cultural comparisons, but also offers a new perspective on how film and television rewrite gender differences in global communication.

Keywords: Gender representation, gaze theory, narrative cinema, cross-cultural analysis

1. Introduction

Film and television play a crucial role in shaping gender imagery and disseminating social norms. Representations of gender differences vary significantly across cultures and genres. The American sci-fi drama Stranger Things (2016) tells the story of a group of children in a 1980s small town searching for their missing friends and uncovering a conspiracy in a secret laboratory. Beyond the central adventure, Eleven, a girl with superpowers, is controlled by and yet constantly rebels against the patriarchal system. Her experiences reveal the conflict between female subjectivity and male power. The British drama Sex Education (2019), set in a British high school sex education classroom, focuses on the struggles of adolescents navigating sexuality and identity. Maeve, a smart and independent girl, maintains her agency in the face of social prejudice and sexism. Her

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relationship with the gentle and passive Otis challenges the stereotype of "male dominance and female dependence."

The Chinese film Raise the Red Lantern (1991) depicts the competition among four wives and concubines within the old family system, highlighting the oppression and passivity of women within the patriarchal family order. The red lantern, a core image, symbolizes power, status, and gender constraints. The Hollywood film Barbie (2023) depicts Barbie's gradual awakening and questioning of gender norms within an idealized doll world. However, the film's highly commercialized style also reflects the conflict between female empowerment and consumerism in the post-feminist era. These cases demonstrate how diverse cultural contexts, narrative strategies, and genre frameworks jointly shape diverse representations of gender difference, revealing the complex interplay between film and television texts, cultural context, and audience interpretation.

This study aims to explore how gender differences are constructed, challenged, and interpreted in film and television. Combining gaze theory with a cross-cultural perspective, this study seeks to explore the narrative and visual mechanisms that reproduce or resist gender norms, and to understand how cultural context shapes the presentation and reception of gender roles.

RQ1: How do contemporary series construct and challenge gender differences through narrative control and visual framing, particularly by negotiating between the male gaze and alternative gazes (e.g., female gaze, oppositional gaze)?

RQ2: How do different cultural contexts, such as Hollywood’s postfeminist consumer culture and Chinese cinema’s patriarchal family order, shape the representation of gender differences in film and influence audience interpretation?

2. Literature review

In film and television studies, narrative cinema is a crucial arena for analyzing gender representations. According to Hole and Jelača, narrative cinema specifically refers to commercial genre films centered on fictional plots [1]. These works continuously encode societal gender norms through narrative, visuals, and character design. Films not only shape characters but also influence audiences' understandings of gender identity and power relations through camera language, composition, and genre conventions. Because narrative cinema has both a wide audience and strong cultural influence, analyzing its gender representations can help reveal how images construct and disseminate societal understandings of masculinity and female agency.

Different types of film exhibit distinct characteristics in the construction and representation of female images. Williams' theory of "body genres" suggests that genres such as pornography, horror, and melodrama employ specific visual and emotional strategies to construct distinct female roles and narrative positions [2]. The "final girl" figure in horror films emphasizes women's subjectivity in extreme circumstances, while melodrama focuses more on family ethics and women's situations in emotional relationships. This theory is helpful in analyzing Stranger Things and Sex Education, as these two shows redefine the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and female narrative power through different genre frameworks.

In the contemporary media landscape, Gill emphasizes the new challenges posed by postfeminism [3]. Gill points out that while feminism is increasingly visible in mainstream film and television, the presentation of this "new feminism" is deeply tied to consumer culture [3]. Images often superficially advocate for female empowerment, but continue to commodify female identity through commercial packaging and aesthetic symbols. This analysis is particularly crucial for cases such as Barbie, where the film's narrative of female self-awakening and the highly commercialized

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visual style create a clear tension, revealing the contradiction between gender empowerment and commodity logic.

Existing research has achieved significant theoretical depth, but it still has shortcomings. Most literature either focuses solely on a single gaze framework, such as over-reliance on Mulvey's male gaze, ignoring the female gaze and the oppositional gaze; or focuses on a single cultural context, lacking cross-cultural comparisons. Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical support for the multiple interpretations of the same film and television text by audiences in different cultural contexts. Therefore, this study will further integrate gaze theory and cross-cultural analysis on this basis to provide new perspectives and methods for exploring the construction, challenge and interpretation of gender differences in film and television works.

3. Case analysis

This study analyzes four texts to answer two questions: RQ1—how narrative control and visual framing negotiate the male and alternative gazes; RQ2—how cultural contexts shape gender representation and audience interpretation.

Stranger Things and Sex Education address RQ1 by examining gaze and narrative mechanisms. Raise the Red Lantern and Barbie address RQ2 by contrasting Chinese patriarchal tradition with Hollywood postfeminist consumer culture.

3.1. Case 1: Stranger Things

Stranger Things is a sci-fi drama set in a small American town in the 1980s. It tells the story of a group of children who, while searching for their missing friend, encounter Eleven, a girl with superpowers. The children are drawn into a complex crisis involving government experiments, monsters, and otherworldly beings, and human emotions. Through character relationships and events, the series explores how gender differences are constructed and challenged in everyday life and in moments of crisis.

Hopper, the town's sheriff, is fiercely protective of Eleven. In Season 3, he violently prevents Eleven from meeting Mike, often losing control of his emotions and refusing to listen. This overprotective behavior reveals a clear tendency toward control. He yells at Mike instead of communicating, evoking the discomfort of patriarchal oppression. Viewers have even labeled this behavior "toxic masculinity" on social media [4].

But Hopper wasn't always a controlling father. During his imprisonment in a Russian labor camp, he remained calm and composed, remained silent during torture, and even managed to escape from his confined environment. He displays strength and patience in difficult situations, yet also reveals anxiety and apology in his conversations with Joyce. He possesses both strength and vulnerability, forming a complex masculine character.

Eleven is a key character in the series. Possessing telekinesis, she can repel monsters and close rifts to otherworldly realms, making her the team's core fighter. However, she isn't entirely formidable. After learning that Mike had concealed their meeting, she experiences emotional turmoil. She deliberately goes out with Max to play, go shopping, and go on dates as revenge. In crucial moments of confrontation with monsters, her desire to protect Mike often fuels her strength. Her emotional fluctuations and reliance on intimacy coexist with her supernatural powers.

However, in the first season, Eleven disguises herself as a "normal girl": a blonde wig, a pink dress, and white sneakers. This transformation is intended to allow her to blend in with the school environment, but it also reflects society's ideals of what a "normal girl" should look like. Her

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appearance changes throughout the seasons, from a bald girl to a teenager in casual clothes, to being trapped in a laboratory wearing prison clothes. Her image is constantly shaped by different systems and situations.

3.2. Case 2: Sex Education

In Sex Education, gender differences are presented not through patriarchal oppression of women, but rather through gender role reversal and proactive negotiation within intimate relationships. Maeve Wiley is an independent, intelligent, and proactive female character. She solves problems for her classmates, runs a sex education consulting business, and frequently takes the initiative to advance relationships.

In contrast, Otis Milburn appears fragile, sensitive, and expressive. He is often hesitant in his romantic choices, lacking the traditional "male initiative" traits. The dynamics of their relationship often show Maeve controlling the narrative rhythm and visual focus. For example, in spaces like the library and the dormitory, the camera frequently establishes interactions through Maeve's gaze, while Otis becomes an observer.

3.3. Case 3: Raise the Red Lantern

Raise the Red Lantern is set in a northern courtyard in the 1920s. Song Lian, forced to become the fourth wife of the Chen family due to her family's decline, enters the compound and is quickly drawn into a rigorous discipline and hierarchical struggle. The camera pans through the high-walled courtyard, rendering the space like a prison-like enclosure, emphasizing the imprisonment of women within a patriarchal order of power.

Ritual life in the compound is governed by ritual. Each day, Master Chen decides which room to spend the night in, and a red lantern is lit. The lit room confers status and privilege, while the unlit or sealed room signifies disfavor and silence. Red lanterns recur throughout the film, becoming a symbol of male preference and female competition [5]. Foot massages are also a visualization of power. The sound of the foot massage reverberates throughout the courtyard, transforming the possession of a woman's body from a private affair into a public performance shared by the entire compound [5].

Song Lian's image undergoes significant changes throughout the narrative. Upon her arrival, she refuses the maids' offer to carry her luggage, demonstrating an educated and independent attitude. But as the struggle intensifies, she learns to exploit the lantern's favor and the system's rules, even fabricating a pregnancy to gain advantage. She gradually becomes addicted to her privilege and loses her sense of self. The film oscillates between pampering and abandonment, revealing how women are disciplined and mutually consumed within the patriarchal family order.

The use of symbols further reinforces this patriarchal logic. The red lantern represents male desire and resource allocation, while the flute, a relic of Song Lian's father, embodies freedom and warmth. Its destruction signifies the rupture of her last spiritual support [5]. The film's repeated appearance of the solitary confinement room suggests that women have no real escape route, and any resistance is swallowed up by the system [5].

3.4. Case 4: Barbie

The narrative and visuals of Barbie are rooted in Hollywood’s postfeminist consumer culture. Barbieland presents women as leaders while relegating Ken to “Beach Ken,” suggesting

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empowerment but framing it through consumer aesthetics [6]. Gloria's speeches highlight contradictory pressures women face—career success, selflessness, financial stability—yet they are delivered as digestible slogans, turning critique into entertainment.

Visual contrasts further reinforce this logic. When Ken converts Barbieland into Kendom, the palette shifts from pink to black, symbolizing patriarchal takeover. Still, the comedic style makes gender politics easier to consume [7]. At the film's end, Barbie becomes human, claiming agency over her body, but her liberation remains tied to consumerist ideals of choice. Audiences split: some saw feminist victory, others critiqued its dependence on commercial logic. The film thus embodies the contradiction between empowerment and commodification.

4. Argument

4.1. Narrative control and gaze negotiation across genres

Narrative and gaze frameworks redefine gender difference through control, framing, and negotiation of gazes. Stranger Things illustrates tension between hegemonic masculinity and constrained female agency. Hopper reflects Brannon's ideals of control and toughness [8]. Eleven embodies both power and dependence, confirming Oberhelman's argument that agency is entangled with patriarchal discipline [9]. Her shifting appearance aligns with Brownmiller's claim that visual narratives reinforce social expectations of femininity [10]. Thus, empowerment is repeatedly undermined by patriarchal logic.

By contrast, Sex Education subverts gender norms through role reversal. Maeve's initiative and Otis's vulnerability echo Eagly's Social Role Theory, showing that gender derives from social roles rather than biology [11]. Visual framing often centers Maeve, reversing dominance and granting her narrative control. As Rößner and Eisend note, shifts in visual dominance signal identity changes—here, affirming Maeve's authority [12]. This demonstrates how comedy and teen drama open space for alternative gazes, whereas adventure and horror tend to constrain them.

Williams's "body genres" theory supports this conclusion: genre determines how female agency and gaze are structured [2]. Even in youth dramas or adventure series, genre conventions limit or expand the negotiation of gender differences.

4.2. Cultural contexts and cross-cultural interpretations of gender

Different cultural contexts determine how narrative cinema constructs gender differences and influences audience interpretation. In Chinese cinema, the patriarchal family order provides the narrative foundation, and women's identities are often fixed in a subordinate position by institutions and rituals. Raise the Red Lantern exemplifies this logic: power is distributed through space and rules, within which women are constantly disciplined and consumed. Spakowski points out that gender in China is not simply transplanted from the West, but rather undergoes a contextualized debate [13]. In other words, while there is a tendency to understand gender as a socially constructed identity, there is also an emphasis on its close connection to biological differences. This dual understanding allows audiences to perceive patriarchal oppression while also connecting it to historical and ethical frameworks when interpreting images.

In contrast, Hollywood films are deeply influenced by postfeminist consumer culture. Barbie juxtaposes female empowerment with the visual language of consumerism, emphasizing individual self-awakening while constantly packaging it with commercial aesthetic symbols. Gill points out that when feminism becomes more visible in mainstream film and television, it often uses consumer

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logic as a medium to transform female identity into commodified images [3]. This contradiction is particularly prominent in Barbie, which superficially presents a female self-definition, yet behind the scenes remains reliant on brands and the entertainment industry. Shih further emphasizes the existence of "temporal coding" and knowledge asymmetry in transnational contexts, with Western representations often viewed as advanced while those in other contexts are perceived as backward [14]. This asymmetry explains why Barbie is praised as progressive in the West but criticized elsewhere as pseudo-feminist and cultural export.

This demonstrates that gender representation in narrative cinema is not neutral. China's patriarchal family order emphasizes community and order, while Hollywood's postfeminism emphasizes the individual and consumption. Different contexts shape different gazes and determine how audiences receive these alternative gazes. This discrepancy reveals the multiple contradictions in the cross-cultural communication of gender images and contributes to the complex and uneven global circulation of feminist discourse.

5. Discussion

This study's two questions are closely intertwined. The first question asks how contemporary film and television construct and challenge gender differences through narrative control and visual framing, negotiating between the male gaze and alternative gazes. It reveals the mechanisms by which gender differences are expressed in specific texts. Stranger Things demonstrates how patriarchal control constrains female agency through emotional and appearance discipline, while Sex Education empowers women with greater narrative and viewing agency through role reversal and visual adjustments. This suggests that gender differences are not fixed but are constantly constructed and challenged within diverse narrative and gaze mechanisms.

The second question asks how different cultural contexts—such as China’s patriarchal family order and Hollywood’s postfeminist consumer culture—shape gender representation and influence audience interpretation. Raise the Red Lantern explores how the Chinese patriarchal family order solidifies female identity through ritual and space, leading viewers to interpret the film as an allegory of family and history. Barbie, embodying Hollywood's postfeminist consumer culture, transforms female empowerment into a symbol of consumerism, creating a contradiction between empowerment and commodification. This results in diverging audience interpretations: Chinese audiences are more likely to connect with history and ethics, while Western audiences tend to view the film as entertainment or part of consumer culture.

These two sets of findings address a research gap. Previous studies have often relied on Mulvey's male gaze, overlooking the possibilities of female and oppositional gazes; or they have been limited to a single cultural context and lacked cross-cultural comparison. By combining gaze theory with cross-cultural analysis, this article not only reveals the dynamic construction of gender differences at the narrative and visual levels, but also illustrates how cultural structures determine how these constructions are received and interpreted.

The significance of this comprehensive perspective lies in its integration of gaze and context, demonstrating that gender representation in film and television is influenced by both internal mechanisms and external cultural logics. Gender representation is not only a question of visuality but can also be considered a question of cultural production and consumption. This offers a context of film and television studies that cuts across text and context and reminds creators of the necessity to be conscious of the multiversality of gender as held by various viewpoints of audiences in global communication.

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6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that gender representation in film and television is shaped by both narrative mechanisms and cultural context. Stranger Things demonstrates how hegemonic masculinity constrains female agency through emotional and physical discipline, while Sex Education provides space for alternative gazes through role reversals and shifts in perspective. Raise the Red Lantern explores how China's patriarchal family order uses ritual and space to stabilize female identity, while Barbie embodies the tension between empowerment and commodification in Hollywood's postfeminist consumer culture. These examples collectively demonstrate that gender difference is not fixed but is constantly constructed through narrative control and visual framing, and is reinterpreted across cultures.

The significance of this study lies in its integration of gaze theory with cross-cultural comparisons, addressing the shortcomings of previous research that has relied solely on the male gaze or ignored diverse contexts. This study directly demonstrates that gender difference in film and television is constructed through the mechanisms of narrative control and visual framing, while also being redefined by cultural structures. This dual perspective not only reveals how texts present gender differences, but also explains why audiences have divergent interpretations across cultures.

This study also has limitations. The case study number is limited, and the genres focus on youth dramas, family films, and commercial blockbusters, lacking broader coverage. The research method primarily relies on text analysis, lacking empirical audience research. Future research could incorporate questionnaires or interviews to explore how audiences from different cultures interpret the same text. It could also expand to genres such as action films and science fiction, examining new shifts in gender representation in global flows.

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