A Gaze of Cruelty, Deferred: Actualizing the Female Gaze in Cate Shortland's *Berlin Syndrome (2017)*

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ABSTRACT

Australian director Cate Shortland's dramatic thriller *Berlin Syndrome* (2017) follows the conventions of the genre involving a psychologically unstable male perpetrator and his female victim, thus could hinge on patriarchal control. Instead, based on a close reading of feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey's theoretical definition of the former, Shortland's cinematic apparatus can be read as an inverse of the male gaze, a type of systematic 'female gaze'. This observation both warrants clarification of the term and concept behind the female gaze and suggests a pressing need to re-evaluate the language of cinema and its habitually damaging depictions of women. In doing so, it may encourage a counter cinema in which such cinematic language is more readily accessible and asserted from a non-male perspective. This essay addresses the question of the female gaze, a term that refers, in fuzzy terms, to the subversion of the male gaze in cinema and elsewhere. To do this, key points in Laura Mulvey's argument are unpacked in reference to other examples of male-on-female on-screen violence — a kind of accepted and frequently employed gaze of cruelty extending Antonin Artaud's celebration of the theater of cruelty. All of this is in support of the argument and demonstration of how Shortland upends key cinematic and genre conventions throughout *Berlin Syndrome* to effectively enact what the female gaze purportedly entails.

Keywords: Laura Mulvey, male gaze, female gaze, film studies, theater of cruelty

The emergence of the female gaze is unquestionably a response to Laura Mulvey's influential essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, written in 1973, and the work of other women's studies and film scholars more broadly. In her essay, Mulvey introduced the concept of the male gaze. While it was imperfect and reflected her notably limited view of female agency at the time, interest in the possibility of its inverse, the female gaze, has increased amid recent breakthroughs in female empowerment, creative contributions, and overall intolerance of unequal distributions of power. The female gaze is also a byproduct of our growing visual culture and the affordances it brings. Our present media environment is dominated by images delivered by the readiness of prosumer tools and quickly disseminated by a host of networked communication channels by professionals and amateurs alike. These conditions inevitably grant more diverse approaches to creating images, ushering more diversity among creators with wide-ranging outlooks. This uptick in multiplicity and experimentation is reflected across all visual discourse: film, television, social media, and beyond. The question of the female gaze feels especially promising and relevant in an age increasingly replete with empowering movements, meaningful discourse, and solidarity among women. It also feels like a necessary and powerful rebuttal against a significant and long history of violence against women on and off the screen. This essay is not concerned with the quality or character of such movements and actions; rather the tools used to overcome narrative depravity and overt sexism in the visual discourse. It is also concerned with accurate labels and definitions used to acknowledge changes, developments, and the conveyance of visual perspectives, especially on-screen. What exactly is the female gaze, and would we be able to recognize it if we saw it?

I wonder if Mulvey's male gaze is in fact so pervasive, training generations of audiences and creators alike to see and comprehend the world through its patriarchal brand of ocular insularity, that the default mode of comprehension inadvertently mirrors its limits on-screen. I wonder if the details and breadth of Mulvey's argument have been overlooked, disregarding some of the more nuanced claims she made, potentially rendering the term "male gaze," and its largely undefined counterpart "female gaze," ineffective when used in unexamined, detached ways. One problematic result of this is the widely accepted idea that a female gaze is automatically achieved when a female/female-identifying creator is behind the camera as the "bearer of the look" and during situations in which a female character is looking at something, regardless of whether the look is mechanized and reinforced by cinematic constructs. However, I argue the female gaze is possible but requires an effusive undoing of the technically and socially structured ways on-screen characters and their stories are depicted, beyond merely the inevitable culmination of a female creator's input or the dominant presence of a female on-screen character. Through a critical analysis of Australian director Cate Shortland's film *Berlin Syndrome* (2017), I make this argument by unpacking the roots of Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, describing how and in which ways it persists, and how one might ameliorate its effects by introducing and ultimately normalizing an appropriate and demonstrative technical rebuttal in the form of the female gaze.

Berlin Syndrome begins quite conventionally from a narrative and cinematic perspective. This goes against a tradition in feminist films that tackle the tenets of patriarchal systems through remixing genres and rewriting women's roles by including well-rounded, sometimes unlikeable women, or by telling stories from a strong female perspective. Like the male gaze, the female gaze is concerned with multiple aspects of the moving image, including filming, characters, and audience engagement. In situations in which the qualities making up the male gaze are ignored, the objectification of female characters can persist, despite efforts to avoid it. At first blush, *Berlin Syndrome* feels this way: like a film hiding its objectification of women behind a strong female lead and a female director. Its narrative substance, a story about female torture and murder at the hands of a delusional male, is not new. In fact, *Berlin Syndrome* follows most of the narrative conventions of the suspense thriller subgenre of which it is a part. In it, Teresa Palmer plays an Australian photojournalist named Clare on tour in Berlin who meets a handsome guy named Andi, played by Max Riemelt, with whom she shares an evening in his apartment. When he goes off to work the next morning (as a high school English

teacher), she takes her time waking up and leaving his flat only to discover she is locked in and unable to find a way out. At first, Clare accepts it was merely an error — she had not found the key Andi must have left behind for her to use — but when she is locked in on the second day, it is immediately clear to her that she is being held captive. Very shortly after this discovery, Andi tortures her intending to eventually kill her.

This film's story has extensive roots in cinematic history, joining the ranks of other films and franchises that fetishize the tortured female body, sometimes with a seemingly strong female character that serves to conceal the imbalance of power, perspective, and agency between genders. The number of films featuring gratuitous violence against women is numerous, and we have come to expect them as viewers. Hollywood films have especially contributed to this: films like Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) groundbreakingly imposed on audiences one of the first gruesome exploits of the female body on the big screen. The unforgettable shower scene, in which Marion Crane is brutally murdered by an unknown stranger, is perhaps so widely known today to the point its impact is somewhat depreciated and banal to audiences. It may even seem comical because it feels unrealistic compared to more recent films, which push the boundaries of realism or enter the realm of stylized violence in a kind of cinematic theater of cruelty. Since this time, there has emerged a range of cinematic approaches that stretch from sophisticated disturbance, like David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac: Volumes I and II* (2013), and Nicolas Winding Refn's *Neon Demon* (2016), to grittier films by lesser-known directors, often executed in franchises, like the *Hostel* films (2005, 2007, 2011) and *The Human Centipede* movies (2009, 2011, 2015), and one-offs like *Captivity* (2007). As we watch these films, we are left to our own imaginary devices to steward empathy toward a victim who narratively warrants it but is mechanically denied it in cinematic form.

These films express the kinds of gut-wrenching, discomfort-inducing theatrics theorized by Antonin Artaud, who was interested in creating an experience in which the boundaries between audience and performances are perforated to produce an overwhelming emotional and visceral effect, the ultimate spectacle of sensation, particularly by way of cruelty. In his enthusiastically written manifesto on the subject, he wrote, "Without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theater is not possible. In our present state of degeneration it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds."[1] And while films are notably different than theater, filmmakers continuously demonstrate the desire to engage the theatrics of cruelty and further push its limits of visual representation. The separation afforded by images, no matter how seemingly absent, is an ever-present protective layer shielding our gaze from the real and satiates our curiosity. What does cruelty have to do with the male gaze? These films combine the once avant-garde creative interest in engaging audiences through the use of shock and horror, with the pleasure derived from looking, and the overarching cinematic apparatus that maintains the active/male and passive/female argued by Mulvey.

At its core, the male gaze is about patriarchal power but also is based on two psychoanalytic theories related to visual pleasure. Mulvey writes, "The cinema offers a number of visual pleasures. One is scopophilia (pleasure in looking)."[2] According to Freud, scopophilia is sexual pleasure derived from looking at erotic objects, such as films or photographs. For Mulvey, cinema is not inherently an erotic object, rather an invitation to look into a private and separate world other than our own. She 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 on the human form."[3] This pleasure in looking is specifically assigned to bodies, and under patriarchal dominance, these bodies "to be looked at" are dominantly female. In *Berlin Syndrome*, though Clare is a photographer by trade, Andi is interested in images as well. She takes pictures of buildings and cityscapes, while he focuses on the human form, taking Polaroids of the women he meets (and

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1   Artaud, Antonin (1958), *The Theater and its Double* (New York: Grove Press), p. 99

2   Mulvey, Laura (1989), *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), p. 16.

3   Ibid., p. 17.

tortures) without their consent or prior knowledge. For Andi, a photographic image is a form of ownership and, by extension, so is his gaze. He enjoys the control of looking and choosing the recipient of his gaze, which transforms into a weaponized catalyst for additional damage and ultimately the death of his subjects.

Mulvey continues, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female." She thus introduces the notion of the male gaze, writing, "The projecting male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness."[4] The way this plays out cinematically varies, such as through the use of lengthy-shot durations and camera movements lingering on a woman's face and body as well as the use of soft or warm lighting to further idealize and feminize her features. Again, following the conventions of mainstream filmmaking, Clare is portrayed through the objectifying gaze of Andi/the audience during their first night together. Though she is unaware of his untrustworthiness at this point in the film, in retrospect, this cinematic framing reinforces her unawareness, and perhaps settles any doubts in the viewer as well, so as to create a starker contrast between the established male gaze and the unexpected turn toward the female gaze shortly thereafter.

Mulvey's understanding of scopophilia in so far as it relates to film then combines the historically subordinate role of women (on- and offscreen) and the pleasure in looking at erotic imagery, which relates to the second psychoanalytic theory: Jacques Lacan's[5] notion of the mirror stage, which is generally a reconsideration of Freud's ideas, focusing on the infant stage in which a child recognizes its own reflection and idealizes the mirror image over its "real one," seeing it as a more complete, independent version. Mulvey's translation of this theory to film focuses on the relationship between the viewer and the on-screen subject, which becomes a "screen surrogate" or "ego ideal," or essentially a superior reflection of the viewer. This aspect of Mulvey's theory is often ignored or altogether dismissed as it requires familiarity with Lacan's particular brand of psychoanalysis. Still, it actually correlates with other widely accepted ideas about how we relate to images more generally. Perhaps first and foremost, Lacan's interpretation of the glorified mirror image builds on the Greek myth of Narcissus, who was paralyzingly mesmerized by his own reflection. This line of thinking continued through Susan Sontag when she invoked Plato's allegory of the cave[6] and Ludwig Feuerbach's philosophies[7] on the powerful illusion of immortality to assert we "prefer the image to the thing, the copy to the original, the representation to the reality, appearance to being."[8] John Berger[9] added to this idea and addressed the ideological struggles we negotiate when filming an unstaged event, and in the process thoroughly examined the power relations between subjects doing the looking and subjects intended to be looked at. Roland Barthes[10] also attributed the idealized image to its use in journalism and advertising, and this line of thinking continues as we contemplate the idealized image in its more ubiquitous form of the selfie, which of course also piggybacks on the ways these images challenge traditional structures of empowerment and ownership. Brooke Wendt describes a similar surrogate relationship and fascination with the idealized

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4   Ibid., p. 19.

5   Jacques Lacan's development of Freud's ideas were delivered in seminars during the years he was teaching and were later published in various volumes.

6   This allegory is located in Plato's *Republic*, originally published around 380 BC.

7   These ideas can be found in *The Essence of Christianity*, originally published in 1841.

8   Sontag, Susan (1977), *On Photography* (New York: Picador), p. 153.

9   Two relevant sources include *Ways of Seeing*, originally published in 1972, and *About Looking*, originally published in 1980.

10   A number of works are relevant, including *Camera Lucida*, originally published in 1970 and a collection of essays called *Image, Music, Text* (edited by Stephen Heath and published in 1978), in which the essay "Rhetoric of the Image" is included.

self, arguing, "Fascinated by the promise of pluripotentiality, we create numerous selfies with many different looks that can be hashtagged to theoretically unlimited and virtual locations."[11]

That we hold images at a distance and with high regard is a testament to their power, especially in a visual culture that favors seeing and looking as dominant modes of experiencing the world. We recognize and cherish photographic images for their realism, or verisimilitude, and because they can be staging grounds for fantasy. During Clare's time in captivity at Andi's apartment, she explores her environment in a desperate search for clues about her captor. In the process, she finds Polaroid images of her naked body inserted in an Egon Schiele art book. The images were obviously taken following their first evening of consensual intercourse. However, it is clear how Andi photographed her body was a surprise to her. More importantly, the pictures showed he had written *MEINE*, the German word for *mine*, on her bareback with a black marker. Idealization and fantasy merge and are particularly troubling in the image-world in light of the popularity of cruelty in cinema, particularly toward women.

The normalization and frequency of such sadistic fantasies account for the continuation of images of helpless, struggling, often bound, preferably beautiful female victims on screen. In her book *The Art of Cruelty*, Maggie Nelson asks, "Is violence simply the sharpest, the fastest, the most immediately or physiologically affecting?"[12] Despite any mixed feelings toward their reception, violent scenes achieve a narrative and aesthetic payoff we have been conditioned to expect, thus allowing for scopophilic desires in viewers to be stirred, which continuously justifies their frequency and the overall acceptance of them. Clare is in Berlin because she is interested in GDR architecture and would like to publish a book of her photographs on this subject. Early in the film, this seems to touch a nerve with Andi, and he cannot understand why she is making a fuss over East Germany, telling her, "you can suffocate anywhere." She offers a lighthearted response and asks him to translate "suffocate" into German, to which he feigns having difficulty and comes up with the word for "strangle" instead, and jokingly demonstrates it on her. It is a moment of realization for the audience who, up to this point, has likely picked up on clues that indicate he is untrustworthy and, in this moment, are forced to confront the joking-but-all-too-realistic strangling of the film's protagonist. It is a foreshadowing device as well as a demonstration of how he finds his symbolic mother in Clare, and he struggles with both wanting to keep her forever and kill her.

The audience begins to discover Andi's perverse interest in torturing Clare, and at least one other tourist from Canada before her, is the result of his overall hatred toward women, stemming from his mother's "abandonment" of him and his father when Andi was just a child. "She defected," we learn when Andi argues with his father, hinting at his resentment toward her and his projection of it onto other women. His choice to live in an abandoned building in the former GDR, East Berlin, is part self-inflicted punishment and part staging ground for entrapping his victims. He seems to be enacting a different Freudian behavior: that of fort/da[13], a game of controlling presence and absence enlisted to mitigate the trauma of loss. Andi wishes both to reenact his mother's act of abandonment and symbolically replace his mother by keeping women against their will. With Clare, he takes this a step further by forbidding contact with her mother, even texting her on Clare's behalf, and withholding the necklace her mother gave her for protection. These gestures are punishments against her and symbolically against his mother, with whom he has a bitterly severed relationship.

Other hints allude to the similarities between Clare and his mother, and this is important because the film has established that Andi hates women by way of hating his mother, the first woman he has ever encountered. As a wandering tourist, Clare has plans to leave for Dresden the next day after meeting Andi. When she mentions this, he acts hurt by this realization. She interprets his pouting as his interest in her, but

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11   Wendt, Brooke (2014), *The Allure of the Selfie* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures), p. 7.

12   Nelson, Maggie (2011), *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), p. 93.

13   Freud discusses this coping mechanism in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, originally published in 1920.

for the viewer, it is apparent there is something more sinister and potentially possessive going on. When she bumps into him again, she approaches him, and without turning around to look at her, the camera closes on his profile to disclose his infantile reaction to her plan as he says, "I thought you wanted to leave." This line links Clare to his mother, and the association continues into the next scene.

The power of Andi's hatred toward women is significant because it justifies his actions from a narrative standpoint, but it also means this film will serve as the stage for his cruel acts of rage on women. For audiences, it is the ideal surrogate image conventionalized by the male gaze. The fake strangle was just the beginning. As Mulvey puts it, "The male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action."[14] Moreover, it proves inseparable the associations he makes between sexual attraction, violence, and power, along with fantasy and emotional healing. Again, this echoes Mulvey's assertion that mainstream cinema privileges the scopophilic identifications between male agency and female oppression. In this quite familiar cinematic narrative, Andi is the male perpetrator in control of the female character. According to the conventions of this subgenre, his desires, as twisted as they may be, should dominate the screen even if we are meant to sympathize with Clare. But this faux strangle will prove a trick in a short while, as it becomes apparent it is not the last time Andi demonstrates violence toward Clare -- in fact, he will perform actual violence on her -- but it is the last time the cinematic apparatus will demonstrate his power over hers.

While *Berlin Syndrome* initially feels as though it is another conventional film wielding a patriarchal gaze, it proves it is possible to tell truly a engaging, even horrifying, cinematic story without assaulting our senses with visual dynamism that proffers violence against women with a lingering, sensationalized approach. While *Berlin Syndrome* begins with the male gaze fully intact, it forcefully deviates from this visual convention to provide an adequate platform from which a truly strong female character can operate. Though the narrative qualifies a kind of violence described above, its filmmaking refrains from indulging its full capacity. The film treats its main storyline in a way that defies expectation through repeated moments of visual deferral at the moment when Clare (and the audience) realizes she is trapped. Here, the relay of narrative information intensifies, and filmmaking diverges into an unexpected but welcomed territory, befitting of the strength of the female character.

Though seemingly subtle, this shift has tremendous effects, offering some recourse on behalf of Clare and aligning her strength and resilience from a narrative standpoint with the way she is depicted on screen. In other words, subverting the coded language of the male gaze enacted by the cinematic apparatus offers a subtle but effective alternative to portraying the on-screen victim. Perhaps more powerfully, it denies one of the key conventions of this subgenre, the so-called payoff of portraying violence to its fullest degree on screen. While conventional film perspectives favor detailed imagery through close-ups and repetition, Shortland's camera resists full disclosure of many violent images, showing them in shorter shot durations, out-of-focus, and at angles that further distance the viewer from the subject of the gaze, like over-the-shoulder framings and unusual long-distance shots.

The same is demonstrated in the scene when Clare finds the Polaroid images of her labeled body. Here the fragmented way in which *he* photographed her body greatly differs from Shortland's approach in other scenes, demonstrating the specific ways cinematic techniques shape meaning and identification for the viewer. Andi's Polaroids treat Clare's body as parts: photographed as though being collected, identified, and cataloged. (And, we later learn, it is. Clare discovers a hidden photo album of numerous women photographed in similarly disturbing ways.) But Shortland's camera, again, treats Clare's discovery with an over-the-shoulder framing, which lets shadows and the glare of light interfere with the content in the images but reveals enough of the subject to communicate important narrative information. Rather than dwell on these images and linger on the manifestations of Andi's twisted anger, the camera emphasizes Clare's response—a close-up of her

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14   Mulvey, Laura (1989), *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), p. 20.

face and eyes—choosing to humanize her and increase our identification with her. Shortland relishes in the moments when Clare actively chooses to look away. As this film is largely about looking — both Clare and Andi are photographers in their own right, and we join their photographic journeys at micro and macro levels — Shortland turns to these small but powerful gestures of looking away or looking only momentarily to cinematically empower Clare. It is one final photograph — an image Clare took of her tortured body — which she sneaks off to the world outside the apartment that ultimately sets her free.

These choices create a technical disassociation between Shortland's camera's gaze and, thus the gaze of her audience, subjecting it to a kind of deferral. The expected payoff is hinted at but never fully achieved. One must infer rather than confront the extent of brutality in these images, avoiding indulging and lingering in their visual pronouncement. Put another way, the payoff is withheld from view, and we derive pleasure in not looking. This technical dissociation more effectively activates, for better or worse, a sense of doubled identification, observed by Teresa de Lauretis and other scholars who note the double desire of the female spectator, who identifies with both the usually male active subject and the usually female passive one.[15] *Berlin Syndrome*'s version of the victim-versus-perpetrator shows Clare is not entirely passive in a refreshing deviation from the traditional narrative film model of a female victim. Still, there is plenty of cinematic evidence throughout history that demonstrates this is not enough. A strong female victim is often photographed like a passive one, which can visually negate the strength of her character. A shift is required in how female bodies are looked at, and maybe it begins with a non-heterosexual male behind the camera. However, I would argue this is not a prerequisite for or a guarantee of successfully avoiding the conventions established by Hollywood or mainstream narrative cinema. What makes Shortland's film stand apart from others is her treatment of the female body by way of the cinematic apparatus specifically, not a rewriting of the narrative conventions of a cis female victim fighting off a cis male perpetrator, which changes not just the characterization of the story but more importantly the mechanism through which it is channeled. This allows both the apparatus and the narrative to support each other's meaning and overall message.

In video game parlance, this is known as ludonarrative symmetry, which means the mechanics, or the actions you take, and the game's narrative match each other. In mainstream narrative films, there has been a consistent dominant mechanic, as it were, for handling female victimhood and violent acts against her, which gives audiences the narrative and cinematic perspective of the perpetrator and his desires. Shortland bends these rules through the combined use of off-screen space and rack focus, a technique that selectively obscures objects in the frame, during violent scenes. These mechanics spare us full visual disclosure of Clare's vulnerable body put on display for Andi's and by extension our visual pleasure. In one example of this, when it becomes certain Andi plans to keep Clare prisoner, he ties her to the bed before leaving for work. The camera wanders into this scene as though with an attitude of partial blindness: Clare's hands and feet are bound, but the camera's gaze refuses to linger on her vulnerability in full, revealing narrative aspects of the scene in only fragments. It is a way of cinematically conveying the disturbing nature of Andi's actions, not necessarily as a moral judgment but as a representation of the kind of delirium that precedes shock or loss of consciousness, which formally represents Clare's point of view, not Andi's. Though he is the active agent in the scene, and Clare the passive victim, the camera's perspective does not indulge this imbalance in power, instead asserts its alternative to actively change the structure of looking. As a result, we can align our gaze with Clare's, conferring on the experience a kind of testimony. This form of identification not only helps to establish an alternative way of examining female victimhood on-screen but is a more accurate representation of Clare's character. Her eventual escape from captivity is a product of her resilience, resourcefulness, and clarity under pressure. Showing her in distress may provide a more dramatic contrast to her release, in an ignorant reduction of the audience's need for oversimplified melodrama, but it also weakens the purpose of

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15   De Lauretis, Teresa (1984), *Alice Doesn't* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

including a believable, strong female character.

By locating the features of the male gaze and, ultimately, the traditions of mainstream narrative cinema, it is easier to understand how the female gaze might be mobilized. Despite its age, and perhaps because it is the first of its kind, the concept of the male gaze remains a clever way of framing the conditions around the cinematic apparatus, the narrative conventions that dominate mainstream cinema, and how we might conceive of a remedy for the issues they present. It is important to emphasize, as Mulvey indirectly does, the undoing of the male gaze is not completed or made possible by the mere fact that a woman is behind the camera or narratively doing the looking for two key reasons. First, this view denies that a film language exists and was created, is maintained, and remains dominated by a heterosexual male perspective. Second, it ignores the qualities of the cinematic apparatus itself, which is denied neutrality under the current patriarchal system. With this in mind, I agree with the assertion Mary Ann Doane made in 1988, writing, "This state of affairs -- the result of a history which inscribes woman as subordinate -- is not simply to be overturned by a contemporary practice that is more aware, more self-conscious."[16]

While awareness and self-consciousness are valuable, particularly among the increasing number of women as producers of content, there is more at work in the male gaze that goes uncomfortably deeper, to the point where, among both male and female creators, it recurs as the dominant, default mode of cinematic engagement, primarily in mainstream narrative filmmaking but with trickling effects across the globe. Awareness and self-consciousness do not go far enough, and often are relegated to external discourses surrounding film narratives. As films like *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (2013) and *The Favourite* (2018) demonstrate, a female-dominated narrative does little to obliterate the mechanical structures of the male gaze. And even among female film directors, key moments in Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003), for example, expose the persistence of the patriarchal gaze. More effective, demonstrable change comes from within the language of film itself, actively subverting cinematic language that frames ideas and understanding of narrative content, creating a one-to-one relationship between strong female characters and the ways they are mechanically depicted on-screen. If we can harness and articulate the ways in which dominant modes of cinematic language can be overturned, then we can leverage its effects. Despite its quasi-torture porn storyline, *Berlin Syndrome's* cinematic form and composition subvert the very elements of the male gaze in a noticeable shift away from its objectifying stance at a critical narrative point in the film, mirroring the shift in power structure between the antagonist and protagonist, ultimately subjugating the male gaze. If there is a definition of the female gaze, then this is it.

Again, decades ago, Doane wrote, "Cinematic images of woman have been so consistently oppressive and repressive that the very idea of a feminist filmmaking practice seems an impossibility."[17] While films like *Berlin Syndrome* prove it is possible, alternative portrayals remain extraordinary and rare, despite an increasing number of women writing, directing, and photographing films. Zoe Dirse's approach to the female gaze comes closest to what I think is successful about Shortland's work in *Berlin Syndrome*. As a documentary filmmaker who shoots her own films, Dirse's work contributes to how we might, as she puts it, "theorize experience not as something that is unmediated or value free but, rather, as something that is culturally produced."[18] Her gaze is not male, Dirse argues, and by extension, neither is the gaze of her camera and ultimately, her audience. However, mainstream narrative films, as a whole, differ from documentary filmmaking because they primarily operate through a patriarchal lens, which requires more nuanced approaches to subversion.

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16   Doane, Mary Ann, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," in *Feminism and Film Theory* ed. Constance Penley, New York, Routledge, 1988, p. 216.

17   Doane, Mary Ann, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," in *Feminism and Film Theory* ed. Constance Penley, New York, Routledge, 1988, p. 216.

18   Dirse, Zoe (2013), "Gender in Cinematography: Female Gaze (Eye) behind the Camera," *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 3(1): 15–29.

Perhaps we have the expectation all wrong when attempting to disrupt the male gaze through the creation of its opposite in the female gaze, a concept with shifting definitions and philosophies. The female-versus-male gaze suggests this polarity is the only model. What is troubling about the term female gaze, and worth including as part of an argument for stronger clarification of its origins, is it prolongs and reinforces a gender binary. The answer to the patriarchy problem is not necessarily resolved by replacing it with a matriarchal one. Moreover, I think the subversion of the male gaze is not and should not be reduced to the technical arrangements of this binary, especially when its terms, under the strict and lengthy edicts of patriarchal structures, are unequal, as are the creative industries through which any disruption might occur. While contributions from creators who identify as female are of course worthwhile, this factor only accounts for part of what is required to dismantle patriarchal frameworks of storytelling. If we dig a little deeper into how to subvert the male gaze, it would then be possible to encourage any content creator to be mindful of this opportunity. Moreover, contributing to a binary way of thinking can be oppressive in itself, and also adds to the weaknesses of Mulvey's ideas, namely that her theory of the male gaze overlooks important differences such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

With all of this in mind, Cate Shortland's *Berlin Syndrome* is not feminist because her gaze is female, but because her camera did not play into the conventions of a familiar narrative that makes it nearly impossible to offer recourse. The story of a psychologically troubled male who takes out his rage on women is subverted by tactical use of camera angles and framing that favor and empower the female victim. This use of tasteful restraint is also evident in Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), which flirted with the possibility of violence against a group of vulnerable women but never engaged it. Seemingly small choices like these have a tremendous impact in terms of the viewers' overall takeaway of the film, the identifications modeled and portrayed, and the persuasive power of both. While uncommon and comparatively less popular, films can break from problematic conventions and offer alternative visual perspectives around the subject of cruelty, particularly with regard to the female body. If we can pinpoint an alternative language of cinematic techniques, mechanically guiding the audience's gaze toward new ways of seeing, then it will not matter who is behind the camera.

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