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The Double Work of the Female Spectator

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THE DOUBLE WORK OF THE FEMALE SPECTATOR

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graduation with Distinction

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Abstract

This essay evaluates and analyses the tropes and conventions of classical narrative cinema, particularly its tropes and conventions concerning women and the female character. I incorporate film studies spectatorship and apparatus theories in order to assess the impact of these tropes and conventions on the female spectator, and use *Gone Girl* as a base point for working through these ideological effects, as well as deconstructing how they work inside the structure of narrative film itself. I was inspired by the way that film moves me to investigate spectatorship for my final paper, and feminist film theory drove me to seek out a film such as *Gone Girl* that might explore what it means to consider the history of women in classical narrative film.

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Preface

In preparing to write my senior writing project, I knew I wanted to draw on my time in film studies classes, and I knew that in particular I wanted to write about spectatorship. In my film studies classes, I was always most interested in learning about why it is that people watch movies. It was fascinating to hear different peoples' different reactions to, and opinions of, different movies. I was interested in why one action movie would appeal to one person but perhaps another action movie might not. Of course, this applied to myself as well, and my favorite part of film studies has been learning more about the films I like, and why I like them. That is what spectatorship is, the relationship that film has to its audience. And of course, this led me to feminist film theory as well. I was intrigued by the different ways that gender and sexuality presented and functioned in film, in reading authors like Laura Mulvey and Linda Williams, and how they explained things that I felt but had never been able to conceptualize or put to words. And so, in studying a history of film, from silent film to Alfred Hitchcock to contemporary film, I was able to see over time the different roles of men and women in film, what Mary Ann Doane calls "the oscillation between feminine and masculine position" in film (Doane 24).

In my research process, I compiled a list of influential and critical essays on feminist theory and spectatorship theories in film studies. Many of the essays, chapters, and articles I had already read either in full or in part for class(es), but I reread everything that I could find and think of that had anything to do with the spectator, or feminist theory. I started with the most influential articles, such as Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and Judith Mayne's "Paradoxes of Spectatorship." In my first film theory class that I took with Dr. Steigman, we read texts like Jean-Louis Baudry's "Ideological Effects of the Basic

Cinematographic Apparatus," and I was fascinated to finally be able to trace all the ways that film is able to construct an entire world that imparts meaning on the spectator through more classic writing as well.

What is significant about this work is how it contemplates film's role in society. The audience is society, and my goal was to examine how the ideology that is reproduced in film can impact the spectator, and by extension, society. Christian Metz, one of the scholars I used heavily in my writing, wrote "it extends the object, it idealizes it instead of turning back on to it, it makes explicit the film's inaudible murmuring to us of "love me": a mirror reduplication of the film's own ideological inspiration, already based on the mirror identification of the spectator with the camera" (Metz 19). Metz wrote about identification and film, which was a large part of the basis of my research, and wrote about why we love the movies. I think it's no coincidence that I gravitated towards his work. I am also fascinated by this cycle of ideology. In a film studies class I am taking focused on the melodrama, we talk about how film can subvert, support, or challenge ideology. All the scholarly work I researched looks at how film does all of these three things, and particularly, how it affects women. As a spectator myself, prior to learning any film theory, I had always noticed that film was able to make me feel certain ways and I wanted to better understand why. This was the inspiration for the exploration of my research, which preceded the actual writing of the paper itself.

For a while, I was unsure of what film I wanted to use. I contemplated using Robert Eggers' *The Witch* which I had seen and loved. But I felt that I didn't have a clear path to relating spectatorship to this particular movie, and I did not want to part with spectatorship. I wanted to pick a movie that made a statement in the direction I was already preparing to go. One day, I was watching *Gone Girl* with one of my friends, and I was struck by how interesting the

character of Amy was. I found myself both admiring her, and also despising her in a way. The dynamic nature of her character was new and appealing to me. She was incredible in how she was able to completely flip the story on its head. The closer I looked at the movie, the more I realized it was actually an incredibly well made and informed movie. I started to notice things I had never seen before, and one day when I was meeting with my advisor Dr. Steigman, I mentioned this movie and she told me that was going to be my paper. After that, I felt it was the right choice.

Gone Girl being a more recent film means that it has not received a lot of critical or scholarly attention, though it has received some, and I was really excited to be able to analyze and write about a movie that I had not already studied. The more I watched, and broke down, and examined it the more I was able to see a lot of the film theories I had been studying at work. David Fincher is a talented, remarkable director without a doubt, and *Gone Girl* is a piece of art work. I like to think my project is distinctive and innovative because I took concepts and conversations about film and brought them to *Gone Girl* to show how this movie does something new and different from what I have already studied, but also references film theory and is aware of its tropes and conventions.

I think it was a risk to choose spectatorship as the starting point for my project instead of starting with the movie, because at the beginning of the writing process I hadn't settled on one movie just yet. I just started writing on the theory itself, hoping the movie would pick itself once I saw my concepts written out. It did, but it was more of a challenge to incorporate the research to the film than it would have been if I had based the research off of the film.

My original vision was that I would actually take several films and use them to track contemporary exploration of female spectatorship. Once I started writing, I realized that in order

to fully analyze more than one movie would be a massive project, beyond what I would be able to do for this project. I had also envisioned that this paper would be divided into two sections, a theory section, and a straight film analysis section. After discussing with Dr. Steigman, and abandoning the idea of doing multiple films, she advised me to weave both together. Because I had started writing the theory first in one big section, I had to chop it down and integrate it into the film analysis, which was challenging because I had not written it be that way. At the end of the process, I felt this made a lot more sense, and ultimately made my argument(s) stronger, because all of the theory supported me as I went. As I worked, the more I worked to weave my theory and my film analysis together, the more definite my thesis became and the more confident I became in it because I started to see all the pieces fitting together like a puzzle. It got easier as I went. I had anticipated that the beginning would be the hardest part, and it certainly was, but overall I would say it went smoother than I had expected.

I can't think of any one specific paper or project that directly inspired my senior paper specifically, but every article or essay I read on spectatorship or ideology inspired my wanting to write a paper about those things. I remember writing a paper on empathy for Dr. Steigman that dealt with apparatus theory and the spectator which would probably be the closest link. But I didn't really adapt any paper to this one. I almost used Jane Campion's *In The Cut* which I had previously studied, in addition to *Gone Girl* and I actually did write some pages on that movie intended to go into this paper (back when I was going to write on multiple movies), but ultimately *In The Cut* lost out to *Gone Girl*. To me, *Gone Girl* was the movie that had the most to say and that I would have the most to say about. Being passionate about what you are writing is important to producing a quality project.

Up until this point, I was very inexperienced at writing longer papers. I've always been much better at sitting down and writing something in one sitting than working over the course of months. It was a challenge to me to have to learn a new writing process, but ultimately I think this was an extremely valuable thing to learn, because not every project in life can be a five page paper you write in one sitting, or a ten page paper you write in two. I also think that as a result of writing this paper over a period of time, I was forced to be more critical of it, and ultimately do a better job. I did way more revisions than I would have done for a smaller paper, and I was forced to be more definitive in my arguments and how I supported them due to how long the paper was. I had to be certain that all the parts of my paper were relevant and worked with my thesis.

I called my paper "The Double Work of the Female Spectator" because I subscribe to the idea that the woman spectator has to see twice as much when she watches movies. She looks through the eyes of the male protagonist, which is classically the most common first person of American Hollywood, and she sees herself in the female characters on screen. In other words, she identifies with the male and female characters. Film intends for its audience to identify with the male protagonist, but she cannot help but identify with the women she sees. This leads to all different kinds of double looking, which I explore through the character of Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl*. I really enjoyed everything that this project had to teach me, about film studies, about the film itself, and about myself as well as my writing. My hope is that when read, my paper offers a new way of thinking about the women who watch film, and the women on screen.

Introduction

In David Fincher's 2014 film adaptation of Gillian Flynn's best-selling 2012 novel *Gone Girl*, the character of Amy Dunne complicates, compounds, and subverts standard theories of female spectatorship in film studies. Fincher's *Gone Girl* is aware of the tropes and conventions of classical Hollywood narrative, as well as aware of the theories of spectatorship and feminism in film, as contemplated by scholars like Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, Linda Williams, Tania Modleski, and others. *Gone Girl* initiates a conversation with these tropes through the character of Amy, who as a character uses, challenges, highlights, and subverts the many different tropes of femininity and the woman character in film as well as within a patriarchal society. Amy is fascinating because she is a new and different point of entry for the female spectator. She works in and around gender roles in a non-traditional and disruptive way, and the film also comments on and revises the history of these tropes and conventions. *Gone Girl* is a case study in the double work of female spectatorship, and offers a series of insights on the complex and dynamic history of the woman's film.

A crucial theory pertaining to the relationship between spectator and screen in film studies, as well as that of my central argument, is that of Jacques Lacan, who argues that film acts as a mirror for the spectator and provides a sense of self for the spectator. Lacan's "mirror stage" has been adapted and implemented in film studies by a number of scholars. Mirror theory is crucial when considering the effects of an ideological apparatus; if what we see is ideology, and what we are, then the ideology we see is inevitably being integrated into ourselves, and how we think of ourselves. Who we are, and what we watch, become intertwined.

In this way, everything that is in film is important to the spectator. For example, how women are portrayed in film references how women are portrayed in society, which ultimately

influences how women think of themselves. This is as Linda Williams wrote in *Something Else Besides A Mother*, “woman’s recognition of herself in the bodies of other women is only a necessary first step to an understanding of the interaction of body and psyche, and the distance that separates them” (Williams 487). When the classic Hollywood narrative paints women most generally as object, for example, and men as hero and primary protagonist of any narrative, what that communicates to the spectator is that men are first, women are secondary, and in some cases, women are only given limited humanity, representation, and perspective. As Laura Mulvey argues women in film are typically allowed to be image, object, or both, but rarely neither, “woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of the woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (Mulvey 716). For Mulvey, this means that women nearly always serve the male characters exclusively rather than themselves or their identities outside of either the male characters, or their gender roles, “her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line” (Mulvey 719). As I will show in this essay the character Amy Dunne, however, becomes more than image or object by moving fluidly between both, and thus subverts the male protagonist, her husband Nick Dunne. She serves her own interests in a way much like a male character by dominating and controlling his female counterpart. Amy demands of Nick the same gendered roleplay that is typically expected from female film characters, who typically are expected to be either mother, daughter, wife, or girlfriend before being an independent identity. Because of this double work in gender roles, I argue she brings agency, depth, and a new perspective to the female spectator.

Apparatus and Ideology

One of the ways that *Gone Girl* uses Amy to compound and subvert classical narrative cinema structures and conventions is through use of the apparatus, and apparatus theory. The spectator uses the apparatus to interact with the characters and plot of the film, therefore what is present in film carries real life significance for the spectator; the film uses Amy to show the potentially damaging effects of classical narrative cinema apparatus theory, and as well as to complicate it.

In his essay “Identification Mirror,” Christian Metz draws on Lacan to discuss mirror theory. For Metz, the child has already learned identification via the mirror stage and so in watching film does not need to see his or her own literal self to be able to identify the image. The skill has already been acquired, “and thus [the subject] is able to constitute a world of objects without having first to recognize himself within it” (Metz 23). This would support the idea that due to the spectator’s real life experience with meaning and signifiers, he or she is more than capable of discerning meaning in film, or at least being able to interact with the film on the level of identification. Metz also writes, “the spectator knows that objects exists, that he himself exists as a subject that he becomes an object for others” (Metz 23). I read this as reference to the relationship between self and the physical world; the body is object, in the sense that it has physicality in the same way that a chair, or a car has physicality. From Metz’ essay, we get that first, the spectator can put themselves inside the film through identification, that a person in film is real as he or she is, and second, that the spectator also recognizes character as object the same way that he or she recognizes human beings as object. This is how film is different from other art forms: it mimics relationships that spectators may have with other human beings, whether that relationship is to the mirror, or another person (the mother figure who first teaches the child

identification). And yet, as we all know, film is literally a perception or replica of reality and not actual reality.

The concept of classical narrative cinema tropes and gender roles played by characters is a running theme throughout the movie, and one that Amy makes look terrifying and toxic. Amy seems obsessed with all things contrived: she stages her own murder, she orchestrates a massive scavenger leading the police and her husband across an entire alternate life story that is convincing enough to land Nick in extreme scrutinization by the police, the media, and his friends and family. She physically harms herself repeatedly for the sake of accurately playing the role of a victim, in a bathroom scene where she violates herself violently with a champagne bottle to simulate a rape. To bring further depth to her performance, she literally acts in front of the security cameras of Desi's house, pretending to run in fear and sob, clutching at the glass with blood running down her legs. She quite literally subjugates her own identity and personality in order to play a role that furthers her goals, and gives her an advantage within the story, but rather than the role that is imposed upon her by those around her, she selects which roles and the scenarios in which she wishes to play them. And while Nick is the character throughout the film who is suspected of being a sociopath, ultimately it is Amy who exhibits sociopathic behaviors. She engineers herself and her life into a story, similar to perhaps a film noir murder mystery. The unnatural dramatization and acting out of these filmic events, outside of the context of its proper genre (perhaps outside of the context of film altogether), are horrific to the spectator, who cannot fathom life being lived the way it might have played out in a movie. We cannot believe the lengths Amy went to in order to develop her story, and what she does to her own body.

Amy's obsession with plot and narrative as manifested through the diary she fabricates and elaborate scavenger hunt games that she plays with Nick reference a history of classical

narrative cinema. The idea that there must be a beginning, middle, and end, with character development and adequate dramatic resolution exposes the dangers that cinematic modes and tropes project onto the spectator. What if average people, the spectators, lived their lives the way the characters in movies do? Deceived one another with elaborate ruses? Acted out narcissistically romantic (and sometimes violent) fantasies in order to fulfill the desire to play a certain (gendered) role, and have certain roles played back to us? Amy expresses to Nick multiple times that she wants him to “play the part.” Amy consciously plays these roles, and demands that those around her play the roles, too. She expects it. Why does she want that? Where does it come from? Her character is in constant juxtaposition with a book character, the children’s book that her parents write which is an idealized version of her own life, within the film, paralleling the relationship between woman on screen, and female spectator. There is also frequent reference to both Amy and Nick’s professions as writers, Nick’s inability to write a book, and Amy’s affinity for a story line, which she ultimately reduces their marriage and lives into.

Another critical element of apparatus theory pondered by *Gone Girl* is the “male gaze.” In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey outlines the gaze constructed in film, how the female character is reduced to object of exhibitionism, voyeurism, scopophilia, and castration fear as well as being a part of Hollywood cinema constructing cinematic pleasure for the spectator (gendered male)¹. Particularly, I am interested in how she identifies the male character with the ego, the object of identification, and how she aligns the female characters with objects of fetish. As the female character is reduced to object by the male gaze, her reduction also establishes the male gaze as the default and dominant perspective. Mulvey also builds on Lacan’s mirror theory, that the objectification of the woman on screen by the men on screen is

shared by the spectators, who then also participate in the male gaze (Mulvey 719). This supports the idea that whatsoever is portrayed on screen is of great importance to the viewer, and has the potential to both uphold and influence ideology, and how individuals relate to and interact with one another. When the screen acts as a mirror, it teaches us how to feel about ourselves, and how we fit in the world. Amy is well aware of this male gaze throughout the film, always performing to and for it, making use of its objectification of her as well as the other female characters to meet her own needs or goals. In this way, because she uses what intends to reduce her to passive object to give herself more agency, and become more active and dynamic of a character within the storyline, she subverts classical cinema's male gaze. And when Amy is able to subvert the "male gaze" within her movie, so too is the spectator, thus providing an escape from the domination of it.

The filmic woman's ability to interact with the spectator through the mirror theory also presents in *Gone Girl* as Amy Dunne's literary double, Amazing Amy. There is a literal image representation of an ideal version of herself, a two-dimensional character avatar that she grows and lives with, which is the children's book series her parents write modeled after her life, only improved upon in every way. This does not coincidentally mimic the relationship between filmic women and female spectator. There is a body double all film goers must grow up with and live with that is the two-dimensional (in character depth and literal depth) and outshines us in everyway, because she can be all the best parts of a woman without actually being human and experiencing human obstacles and struggles. The toxic relationship between Amy and Amazing Amy is apparent throughout; she resents the too perfect version of herself, interestingly as a book character, Amazing Amy's only purpose is to be looked atⁱⁱ. Amy's rebellion from, and resentment of her avatar validates frustration with the classical narrative ideal woman character,

who is perfect image and nothing more. Amy rejects this relationship, and engineers her own identity and depth of character, once again throwing away classical narrative convention concerning female characters in favor of one more liberated and multi-dimensional.

Narrative Form

The film also operates as a double narrative, the form itself mimicking the double work of the female spectator, as she must negotiate the storyline of the male protagonist, and the storyline of the female object of identification. There are two alternative perspectives present: Amy's constructed storyline, and the diegetic "real" storyline, or what the spectator is meant to assume actually happened. However, both are complicated, and must be carefully examined in order to be understood, if they can be understood at all. The divergent narrative form calls into question the very institution of patriarchal order in film, as well as its tropes and conventions, by exemplifying its flaws.

The film begins with Nick's story, presenting the history of their relationship, and the current troubled state of their marriage. Amy is seemingly absent from this narrative. However, when the story diverges, and Amy reveals her interference with the plot, the spectator realizes that the story has been tampered with. Amy has supplied it with false information, via the diary that signifies the secondary narrative running parallel to the plot. This storyline is more meta, and less literal. Nick's story seems to be straightforward, though lacking in the knowledge and explanation that Amy's has, it seems linear and easy to follow. Amy's story brings the complication, showing the underbelly of the story of marriage Nick presents, the male ego perspective, and her perspective bringing out the violence of the repression of the woman character and perspective, or the fabrication of an idealized woman character, what Amy calls the "cool girl," that a woman should become in order to make herself palatable for the man.

Amy's frustration within her role manifests in violent performance repeatedly, with her ex-boyfriends as well as with Nick. In order to direct her relationships in the way she wants them to go, she must perform within the female role (rape victim, kidnap victim) that will control or direct the men in her life.

The cinematography of the film indicates and cues the unreliability of the narrative(s). The cross-cutting, and chopped continuity disorient the spectator within the story line, making the chronology and validity of events unclear, especially as Amy's deception becomes apparent. When Amy's diary scenes come into play, the scene before fades out, while the diary itself fades in with Amy's voiceover, signaling movement from one story line to the next. When she reveals her deception, her voice within the film literally becomes instantly unreliable, it does not tell the truth. The spectator is forced to question everything within the diary, which gave us the story of Nick and Amy. The spectator is left wondering what of their story is true, and what is false? And can we trust her voice moving forward? But if Amy is manipulating the narratives including the characters within it, can we trust any element of it? As the two stories intermingle, and become less and less discernable from one another on the basic level of plot, the fades disappear, further disorienting the distinction between truth and performance, if a distinction even exists between the two.

Another thread embedded within the narrative(s) is the story line presented by the media, which is again another layer of subjective truth. Throughout the film, the characters watch a news channel that provides a surface level, tabloid-esque version of the events taking place, portraying Nick as both villain and eventually as hero, Amy as sweetheart and eventually as heroine. This is the story that seems to motivate Amy most. In fact, her original intention had been to kill herself, indicated by the literal calendar of events tracing the plot of her deception.

But she removes this from the calendar following a news story painting her as innocent, beloved victim, and Nick's participation in performing the role of devoted, apologetic husband. At this point, it seems that the storyline in the media becomes paramount to Amy, and in presenting her as an idealized version of herself, she becomes more devoted to performing this role again, as if the media coverage validates and incentivizes her performance of the role that has so frustrated and suffocated her. This propels her own narrative forward.

Oppression and forced projection of the female perspective, and enforcement of patriarchal gender roles and ideals results in an explosive, toxic manifestation of these roles that both disintegrates and upholds the institution of marriage within the film, shown by its form. This disintegration is present in the two intertwined narrative perspectives; the spectator will find it difficult to extract the truth from this story where both Amy and Nick are flawed characters and unreliable narrators, seemingly victims of the institution of marriage itself, which they both reference as culprit (and demonize) throughout. Amy lashes out against the pressures of being "the cool girl," Amazing Amy, and Nick's wife, by making all of these things her weapons against him, and trapping him within the same system that traps her. His consent to playing by the same rules of convention as she feels she must is a turning point in the film. This newfound agency liberates her, without driving her outside of the system and into total anarchy beyond meaning, or suicide. The metaphoric death she describes is reversed when she regains control of Nick in the same way that she has been controlled, and thus the troubled narrative maintains its somewhat horrific equilibrium alongside their troubled marriage.ⁱⁱⁱ In spite of remaining within the patriarchal form of marriage, Amy does so in a violent, non-passive way that contrasts sharply with the idealized, passive female character of classical narrative film.

Masquerade

Because of the male gaze in film, the female spectator is bound to doing double work when she watches movies. She both identifies with the female characters, and objectifies them. This creates double work for her, and creates conflicting ideology as she both sees herself and objectifies herself through the characters on screen. Through Amy's domination of various gender roles that she plays typified by classical narrative cinema, she begins to unweave this conflicting spectatorship created by classical form and content pertaining to the female character.

In "Film and the Masquerade," Mary Ann Doane discusses the female spectator in great proximity to what I have been discussing. In particular, she considers how film constructs a feminine and masculine binary spectator. As she writes, the male gaze of the film, which treats woman as image and object over character of depth (such as the man), negates the perspective of the woman (Doane 21-22). However, as I have considered, simply denying accurate characterization and humanization of female characters does not eliminate the female spectator's depth and ability to make meaning of the characters on screen, and this is why Amy is a refreshing character to the spectator. In considering the treatment of female characters, Doane writes "The woman is there as the butt of the joke – a "dirty" joke which, as Freud has demonstrated, is always constructed at the expense of a woman. In order for a dirty joke to emerge...the object of desire – the woman – must be absent and a third person (another man) must be present as witness to the joke" (Doane 33). What she highlights here is the third person, the spectator, who becomes coconspirator in the joke that is the woman in film. It is this relationship, between the male gaze and the audience that confirms the objectification and reduction of the female character through gender roles and tropes; without the third person to validate the joke(or ideological message), the joke is lost, and the making of meaning is

incomplete. However, what happens when the spectator, this third person is a woman rather than the target audience of the default perspective, a man? The female spectator does double work when she identifies as both third person spectator, and female object. As I have suggested earlier, that the relationship between female spectator and film is complicated, it becomes more complicated when she participates in her own objectification. Film teaches its audience to treat woman as both image and object, and Amy begins to undo this trend by presenting a dominating female voice within narrative.

For a female character, Amy has a striking amount of agency. In classic Hollywood narrative film, typically the female character is either subject to the will and direction of the male character, or in some cases her children. Her purpose is to fill a role, whether it be mother, sister, daughter, wife, or any other variation of the caregiver. Interestingly, Amy holds fiercely to the concept of playing a role or performing a part, the difference being that where the societal implication of gender roles tends to limit and restrict women in classical narrative film, Amy uses hers to give herself agency. When she fakes a pregnancy, she uses that pregnancy to manipulate Nick into doing what she wants. When she wants to use Desi Collings to gain a place to stay, she plays the damsel in distress and takes advantage of his money and other resources, and even disturbingly falsifies rape and assault in order to manipulate the behavior of her boyfriends. What is even subversive about her as a character, problematic as this behavior may be, is her insistence that Nick (and her ex-boyfriends), her husband and the film's male protagonist, also play a proper role as husband, and play it well, as she has felt she must do. She exerts an exceptional amount of control over herself and even over Nick. What Amy absolutely does not lack as a character is depth, depth to the point of absolute deceit.

I have already considered the interaction between the characters and the media within the film. Additionally, the double screen of the media provides an additional layer of spectatorship and masquerade. While the audience is watching Nick and Amy, Nick and Amy are watching themselves on television, providing a parallel of the film spectator identification relationship. Amy and Nick both perform for the media in order to validate their own lives. The question the film begins and ends with, "What have we done to each other?" perhaps parallels this relationship between spectator and screen as closely as it does Nick and Amy's abusive, manipulative relationship.

Doane calls the phenomenon produced by film "the difference between the image and the signified" (Doane 77). Her argument outlines that, as I have indicated, film creates a situation in which the image (women in film) is made into something other than real thing, which then imposes itself on real women, which is also what Amy does of the various gendered roles she plays. Film exacerbates the problems of patriarchal society, by actually making women into objects, or images. Whereas in the world outside of film, women are real people, in film they are not, and humanity as well as subjectivity is limited to men only. The result is that the female spectator may be driven to identify as literal image and object, in a way that far exceeds what she would if film did not make this impression. Doane talks at length about relation to the space between spectator and the screen, the relation of female spectator to the body (filmic and her own), but I think what is neglected here is the psychology and ego of the female spectator. What does it do to a person to be reduced to physicality, to object, or to image? That she must be so simplified, what impact does that have on her personality, her thoughts about herself, her thoughts about other women, and her role in society? That her only importance and depth begins and ends with her physical being? How does it make the woman spectator feel about herself?

Man is elevated thought and consciousness and woman is object and image, secondary two-dimensional character at best. Amy's use of these roles to give herself agency subvert their limitation of the female spectator.

Noir Melodrama

The different ways that *Gone Girl* works through and implements elements of the melodrama genre usually most closely associated with women and the female spectator further calls into question the meaning, purpose, and function of women in film. Amy both utilizes and challenges various tropes and conventions of the melodrama, such as the different female roles she chooses to play or not play at will, and the ways that her position highlights various roles in other characters, while using elements of the film noir, a male dominated genre, to heavily contrast the motives and desires of its characters with that of the female gendered melodrama.

Amy is a problematic melodrama character from the start. She lacks in any maternal orientation, her sultry, ambitious presentation negates the gentle, self-sacrificial typical female lead in any melodrama. However, the elements of melodrama are present: the film takes place in the domestic sphere, the conflict revolves around Amy's struggle to fit in this patriarchal order.^{iv} While it is somewhat unclear as the narrative goes back and forth on the topic of children between Nick and Amy, Amy seems to be the one who initially resists having a child, which is in sharp contrast with the tradition of the woman as mother role heavily prevalent in classic narrative cinema, and seems to be a large part of the rift created between her and her husband. The problem of wife as non-mother is heavily implicated. However, pregnancy becomes a weapon Amy can levy against Nick, and use to manipulate him, and also gives her greater worth in the eyes of the media and public. The power of the mother character is also shown through Noelle Hawthorne, Amy's false "pregnant idiot" friend, contrasting her sharply against Amy

who is an intelligent “decorated scholar and journalist.” Amy’s condescension towards Noelle is palpable and overt, and the film does not attribute intelligence, or really any other positive character trait to Noelle besides mother. This is an interesting viewpoint for the film to take, seeming to make questionable the value of the pregnant woman, or mother, above the non-mother. Here, the mother figure is clearly devalued, and yet, as the film progresses, Amy is able to find power and manipulation through assumption of the mother role, using it as leverage against Nick. After all, it is Nick’s mother and her failing health that precipitates Nick and Amy moving to Missouri. The power of the mother is certainly present in the film, its significance within the patriarchal order also being inverted by Amy’s manipulation. Yet again, she is able to take something used to keep women limited and within their compulsory gender roles and use it to undermine Nick and elevate her own status in their relationship, and in society.

Alternately, the film employs noir-style lighting, and incorporation of the detective character (notably female) against the melodramatic material. There is a lot of dim lighting and use of shadows, often times cast over Amy and Nick when they are together, even as a happy couple, making it hard to see them and at times obstructing the spectator’s view and understanding of what is going on. This adds to the thriller feel of the film, as well as putting the spectator on guard in the domestic space of the melodrama as it becomes crime scene, the place for violence. Amy and Nick are constantly navigating a world of shadows where there should be lightness. Incidentally, the characters are most illuminated when they are in front of the flashing lights of cameras.

Amy’s Rivals

The secondary characters in *Gone Girl* provide insight into the various classical roles of the woman in film, and what their implications may be to the spectator, by contrasting with Amy

and the inconsistencies of her own roleplaying, her failure to fully commit to one single role. In this way, the characters of Andie and Margot both serve to highlight the elements of the idealized female character in classical narrative cinema that are missing in Amy, but that also give Amy her subversive and challenging qualities.

The role of Margot highlights Amy's independence and autonomy. Where Amy fails to serve and please Nick as his wife, Margot, Nick's twin and literal female double, fills in. She mortgages her house to pay for Nick's lawyer; she promises to love him even if he has killed his wife, and fully believes him when he says he did not. Even in the face of his infidelity, Margot remains faithful, and asks very little of Nick, unlike Amy. She quite literally takes care of him after Amy disappears. Margot very much fills the familial female role in Nick's life; she is his blood relation, she is unmarried and single and so he is quite literally the man in her life, to the point that the film even questions through the media as to whether or not their relationship is incestuous, overtly letting the spectator know that we should notice their relationship is a little closer than should be comfortable for us to watch. Margot displays the kind of loyalty and allegiance to Nick that a wife typically would. She believes, and supports him without question, as convention would require all women do of their men, and is the one woman in the film that Nick trusts completely. However, Margot's hands are tied. She is bound to save her brother in every way that she can, no matter how much sacrifice it requires of her, and ultimately at the end she remains alone with only Nick, her brother, as the man in her life, who ultimately she cannot save from Amy in spite of her greatest efforts. The self-sacrificial woman in the film loses out, yet again, and this time she loses to the woman who has agency within her role, rather than mere loyalty or subservience and humility. Margot sacrifices agency in her devotion and submission to Nick, which Amy does not. In a sense, Margot also does double work. She is heavily aligned

with Nick, on that she is his literal twin and body double (“I’ve been with you since the womb”) but also in that they are united against Amy. Margot is the female perspective as cooperative and supportive of the male dominated patriarchal system, and narrative plot structure. She is critical of the disruptive female perspective, plays by the rules of the male protagonist, and agrees to all his wants and needs above consideration of her own.

Another rival female character to Amy is Nick’s student girlfriend Andie. Andie is young, attractive, obsessed with Nick, sexually driven, and complacent. She is this same kind of idealized woman, her main purpose and focus is Nick, the primary difference being that she is more desirable to Nick than Amy. Amy’s objection to her failing marriage and Nick’s refusal to participate is in large part due to the affair, which she witnesses in a scene that depicts Nick seducing the young girl in an almost identical setting in which he seduced and won over Amy herself. This triggers Amy’s staging of the elaborate scavenger hunt that targets Nick’s affair, and purported framing of her own murder (suicide). Age, beauty, and submission are thus valued higher, and Amy’s objection is in part to this devaluation of herself by Nick, which threatens their marital happiness. She will not be meekly cast aside within her marriage and replaced by Andie, she must punish Nick for his infidelity, and thus challenges the system or patriarchal order that values a young, attractive, submissive woman above any other type of woman, particularly the woman with agency that resists typification. There is an interesting conflict presented here by which the idealized, sexualized, submissive woman is juxtaposed with the woman with agency, in spite of classical narrative cinema’s tendency to preference the sexualized idealized woman within its narrative form, in *Gone Girl*, she actually threatens the institution of marriage by potentially usurping Amy, the legitimized wife, within the domestic space. However, it is Amy’s independence and agency that moves her from position as

sexualized and idealized woman. In this conflict, agency demotes her to unsuitable (or undesirable) as wife, and therefore unsuitable for the domestic sphere. In this way, the woman with agency is pitted against, or detrimental to, the entire system of the patriarchal family order.

While she is villainized in the process, her villainy is in her agency and depth of character, two elements of character development that have been consistently denied to women characters in film. Ultimately, what Amy wants is for Nick to portray unwavering, and total devotion to herself, and the upkeep of their idyllic image. Interestingly enough, typically this is the role of the man in the film, who demands that his female counterpart exist only to support and validate himself and his identity.

Conclusion

In the context of my argument, the women in American cinema, generally speaking, are not afforded the same perspectives and agency within the narrative that the male protagonists historically are. If we subscribe to the mirror theory and its implications, we have to ask ourselves, who does the spectator identify with, and what does that mean? If the female spectator identifies with the female character, then her mirror is not the same as the male who identifies with the male character. If film reproduces (or sometimes subverts) real life societal and cultural pressures, and various gender roles and tropes, how is it then any more or less impactful than simply living in American society? I would argue that by elevating these ideologies to the screen, we are amplifying, and mass-producing them, just as Nick and Amy's "story" is mass produced through the media in the film. Pressures that perhaps not every viewer has or had felt before in their lives are shown in high definition across the country and the globe, and become more far reaching and influential than ever. The reproducibility of film in the technological age via

laptops, and increased accessibility of the television increase the ideological impacts, and therefore the importance of film within society.^v As film becomes more reproducible, film becomes more and more important within an ideological system, so too do all its genres, tropes, and conventions. The woman as object of fetish, or the totalizing male gaze, or the montage reach a wider audience, and on a greater scale than ever before. We have movies in our homes, on our phones, on airplanes, in classrooms, in all sorts of places. It's not an event, or special occasion to go to the movies anymore, it is embedded in the everyday lives of the average person. Whether or not one believes film to be "realistic" or that it accurately portrays "reality," at this point, film *is* part of our reality, simply in the fact that it operates in our lives as much as anything else, the average person interacts with movies and has a relationship with movies, learns from movies, as Metz wrote, "I know that I am really perceiving, that my sense organs are physically affected" (Metz 25). At the movies, we hear human voices, we see human forms, we observe human experiences. It does not exist outside of reality, cinema has become integral to modern reality.

Mary Ann Doane also writes of the female spectator's ability to vacillate between male and feminine gaze, which indicates the ability of woman to be the active looker (Doane 80). This in and of itself is evidence that the dichotomy in film is entirely constructed, that she can recognize the refusal of agency to film women through the active male gaze, thus patriarchy and gender roles are not inherent to the nature of the sexes. If a female spectator can be the active looker of the male gaze, she is not so simple that she cannot be the ego, or the subject, or the main character with a humanistic portrayal in film. But it is the lack in classic Hollywood narrative that is confirmed by her ability to do so, and this lack further informs her opinions of herself. Were she unable to assume the role of active looker, she would be unable to perceive

that her on screen counterpart had been denied the agency that a person should have, that there was an attempt made to deny her own agency through film, and in life outside of film. However, perhaps this restriction may create a psychological restriction. The female spectator now knows that it is desired of her that she be image and body, and that ideally she is only image and body. She has been fetishized, and participated in her own fetishization, making the inclination to adhere to that fetishization even stronger, because she has seen herself from the subject perspective of the male, whose privilege in a patriarchal society prefers that she remain subordinate and objectified. She now imposes that standard on herself, recreating the film woman in herself because that is the standard to which she is held. The imposition of film within the everyday life of the modern person has increased this pressure, the world of film is more intertwined with the world outside of film than ever before, and the idealized woman surrounds the spectator at all times, because the spectator is now a spectator not just at the movies, but wherever there may be a screen. What this means is now more than ever, spectatorship is important, and also, that now more than ever is film beginning to think about what it means to be a woman in film, or a woman who watches film.

Gone Girl's conscious deployment of Amy's character indicates recognition of all the ways that films influences not just film, but the lives of the spectators. From the multiple ways in which a double screen is created in the film, and all the ways that Amy toys with gendered roles and conventions as I have discussed, the film offers a meditation on and experimentation with classical narrative cinema and its use of the woman. The messages Amy sends through the screens in the movie makes commentary on the ways in which we use the screen, sometimes as mirror, sometimes as lens of our real lives. When watching *Gone Girl*, the female spectator is making meaning of the significance of the action on screen as well as the meaning made within

her own life that feeds into an entire patriarchal order and system of ideology. Where *Gone Girl* is able to subvert that, though not entirely, it is able to provide some relief for the female spectator when Amy makes some agency for herself and the spectator in the context of a history of oppressive, compulsory male gaze.

ⁱ In Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," she further defines the terms exhibitionism, voyeurism, and scopophilia as well as castration fear in context of film studies analysis and her argument.

ⁱⁱ "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*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire" (Mulvey 719)

ⁱⁱⁱ "Nick Dunne took my pride and my dignity and my hope and my money. He took and took from me until I no longer existed. That's murder." *Gone Girl* dir. David Fincher.

^{iv} Mildred Pierce footnote

^v I referenced Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" in my research on spectatorship for its relevance in theories pertaining to impact on the spectator.

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