

Beyond the Lens: Male vs. Female Gaze in the Character Evolution of the *Transformers* trilogy and *Bumblebee*



Kashphia Mimoza

213013025

Department of English and Humanities

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Kashphia Mimoza
213013025
Thesis Supervisor: Anika Tahsin

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "A. Tahsin", is written over a light blue grid background. The signature is stylized with a large initial 'A' and a long, sweeping underline.

Anika Tahsin

Designation: Lecturer

Department of English and Humanities

DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Kashphia Mimoza". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'K' and a long horizontal stroke extending across the middle of the name.

Kashphia Mimoza
213013025
Department of English and Humanities

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to compare the *Transformers* trilogy of films with the movie *Bumblebee* to understand the effects of the male and female gaze in character writing. The literature review reveals how different the female gaze is in portraying characters compared to its male counterpart, as well as explore the purpose and audience reactions of both gazes in general. The methodology employs Laura Mulvey's theory of male gaze and involves textual analysis by examining the character writing, narrative and cinematic techniques involved in the movies. Such qualities are then analyzed through the lens of the male and female gazes and thoroughly evaluated based on how they change the tone of the movie and on the impression they may leave on the audience. The result of the analysis would show that the male gaze may lean towards sexualization of female characters and a lack of depth in terms of the writing of the male protagonist and character relationships. Analysis would further reveal that the female gaze may result in more grounded character writing and a more equal gender dynamic within the narrative. This would imply that each gaze results in significantly different character portrayals within movies and as such affects the overall film significantly. The research also further aims to establish a connection with the reoccurrence of the male gaze and the patriarchal system, while also analyzing audience receptions of both gazes. It would thus contribute to identifying reoccurring writing patterns within contemporary Hollywood cinema and as such would aid in creating more balanced character writing and compelling stories within such films.

Keywords: Male gaze, Female gaze, Female agency, Patriarchy, Gender dynamics, Cinema

Chapter 1

Introduction

Hollywood cinema's depiction of women has long been criticized to be confined to roles that serve to entertain the male audience rather than a general one. Contemporary movies see roles of women as either those that support the male leads or serve as a cinematic spectacle to the male audience, supported by both narration choices and camera angles. These examples would be termed the male gaze, coined by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema". Michael Bay's *Transformers* trilogy, which include *Transformers* (2004), *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009) and *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011), a triad of action-adventure science fiction films can be seen as the quintessential example to observe aspects of the male gaze. Such choices in writing may cause the female characters to have limited agency, be reduced to being a visual spectacle for the audience or be easily replaced within subsequent sequels. There exists, however, a counterpart to the male gaze, known as the female gaze, defined by its writing of female characters with agency, depth and complexity that grounds them as fully realized characters who can be empathized with. Whilst it is not as widely established as the former, it can still be observed within literature as its counterpart. Travis Knight and Christina Hudson's *Bumblebee* (2018), a movie set within the same franchise, can be observed to be one that employs the female gaze, and as such, reflects that in its treatment of its characters.

This thesis uses Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze as established in her essay "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema" (1975) to psychoanalytically examine the character writing

choices and complexities within Bay's movies. Mulvey's framework allows for proper identification of cinematic choices in the movies that fall under the male gaze, such as portraying female characters through a voyeuristic, sexualized lens which in turn puts the power of the observer on the male audience. While there are no established papers on the female gaze, several secondary sources cited in this paper allows for recognition in writing patterns that appeal to a female demographic. Such patterns can thus be observed in *Bumblebee* (2018) and include but are not limited to a more grounded, humanized depiction of female characters and strong emotional bonds. This differs primarily from the visual-based, voyeuristic male gaze. As put by Denzin, "Beyond the tain of the male mirror, the feminine eye opens the way for a new epistemology that goes beyond the masculine, ocular-based systems of knowing" (185). The differences provided by both gazes prove a strong contrast in the writing and treatment of the characters within their respective movies.

The primary objective of this research is to identify patterns within the films that align with either the male or female gaze. Laura Mulvey's theoretical framework would be used to analyze the characters of Sam Witwicky and Mikaela Banes of Michael Bay's *Transformers* trilogy, who are the male protagonist and the female love interest for the first two of the three films, respectively. Similarly, the female protagonist, Charlie Watson, of *Bumblebee* (2018) will also be analyzed to find elements that align with the characteristics of the female gaze. After examination of these patterns, this research aims to establish the key differences of each gendered gaze and how they affect the overall narrative of each film. Furthermore, this study will try to establish a link between patriarchal practices and the domination of male gaze in cinema, as well as explore reactions of the audience to each gaze.

This study is guided by the research question of “How do the male and female gazes influence the portrayal of the characters in the *Transformers* trilogy movies and the *Bumblebee* movie?”. This question is directly linked to the objective of this study and would thus be answered through psychoanalytical dissection of the characters in the films, supported by the mentioned theoretical framework.

Ultimately, the goal of this research is to fill in the gap of study pertaining to the comparisons of the male and female gaze. This study would enable the general audience to recognize recurring patterns and elements that pertain to the male gaze within films that are mass produced. It would thus help establish that even realms of entertainment are not exempt from patriarchal practices that affect the way characters and stories are presented and shaped. This research will also aim to establish the female gaze as an alternate way to develop a narrative that offers a more humanized portrayal of female characters and is thus free from the effect of the male gaze. Finally, this study aims to investigate the domination of male-gaze-centric stories within contemporary Hollywood cinema, as well as explore various audience reactions when presented with gazes alternate to the dominant male one.

Chapter 2

Methodology

The focus of this research paper is analyzing how the male and female gazes affect the writing and development of the main characters of the *Transformers* trilogy and *Bumblebee* respectfully, utilizing Laura Mulvey's theoretical framework. A qualitative research method has been employed as this study involves the analysis of movie scenes, utilizing scholarly articles and Mulvey's gaze theory. The methodology used is textual analysis due to the thorough dissection of characters and cinematic elements involved in the respective films. Other scholarly articles that are related to the topics of the male and female gazes are summarized and utilized in analysis as well.

Laura Mulvey's gaze theory as established in her essay "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema" will be used as the major theoretical framework for this research paper. Using the gaze theory, as well as other secondary sources, the character construction of Sam Witwicky and Mikaela Banes from Michael Bay's *Transformers* trilogy, as well as Charlie Watson from *Bumblebee* will be thoroughly examined. Both films will be critically analyzed in terms of how much the male and female gazes affect the character writing, as well as narrative and cinematic choices. This includes an analysis on how the male gaze sexually objectifies female characters in the *Transformers* trilogy, the role and prominence of characters of both genders, and a comparison to how *Bumblebee* offers a different character construction through female-gaze-oriented storytelling. The gaze theory as well as several secondary scholarly articles will also help examine the patriarchal structure and normalization of male gaze in cinema, as well as a look into varied audience receptions to the emergence of the female gaze.

Chapter 3

Literature Review

Contemporary Hollywood movies often film their narrative stories through the gaze of the heterosexual male to appeal to that audience, a phenomenon termed by Laura Mulvey to be the “male gaze”. This gaze can be especially observed in Michael Bay’s first trilogy of movies in the *Transformers* franchise. At the same time, the use of the female gaze is not ignored in cinema, as seen in *Bumblebee*. The current research aims to critically analyze how each gaze affects the writing of the main characters and compare how they are presented in each movie. The research will also aim to examine the reason for the predominance of the male gaze in the film industry, the emergence of the female gaze and an exploration of audience reactions to both. The secondary sources provided, arranged thematically, also help further critically analyze the effect of the male and female gazes and what they encompass, as well as solidify the theoretical lens of this research.

Laura Mulvey’s gaze theory helps establish the male gaze in cinema as something voyeuristic and associated with the sexualization of the female form. These elements can be found within Michael Bay’s *Transformers* trilogy. The article “Technomasculine Bodies and Vehicles of Desire.” by Wilson analyzes the treatment of the female lead of the Bay’s films, Mikaela Banes, as a sexualized figure, meant to be framed as a trophy which must be won over by the male protagonist, Sam Witwicky. The movie does not showcase Mikaela’s struggles as serious despite her being a prominent character, the camera simply focuses on her outward appearance. Such elements of female character writing are also present in other Hollywood

cinema. My thesis analyzes Mikaela's character in a similar vein, and Wilson's analytical point add to the same observation regarding character writing affected by the male gaze.

Similarly, Cardullo's article, "Of Virgin Suicide, Human Bondage, and Male Indulgence", analyzes the treatment of female characters and a tendency of films to portray their struggles as shallow, specifically in the movie *The Virgin Suicides*. He stresses that female characters in such movies may have a lack of depth and are merely portrayed as objects of desire for the male audience rather than people with struggles, which matches Mikaela's treatment in the *Transformers* films. As put by Cardullo, "They remain obscure objects of desire who are removed from reality, and whose existence is conferred on them only by the male gaze". (491). Cardullo's examination of female characters in *Virgin Suicides* and thorough criticism regarding their lack of depth has similarities with the character analysis I implement in my thesis, and as such his insights on the construction of characters are vital.

By contrast, Greven, in her article, "Contemporary Hollywood Masculinity and the Double-Protagonist Film", discusses the presentation of male protagonists as they appear in various double-male roles in contemporary Hollywood cinema, such as *The Hard Way*(1991) or *Miami Vice*(1984). She discusses the idea of male protagonists in such films to be a subject of masculinity and narcissistic tendencies and concludes that characters written with such traits often compete for the spotlight of the lead role. My thesis similarly also explores the writing of male protagonists in a male gaze centric film, and as such her observations provide insightful information on how the latter affects cinema.

Von Braun, in Chapter 3 titled "Staged Authenticity: Femininity in Photography and Film" of her book *Gaze Regimes: Film and Feminisms in Africa* discusses the role and presentation of

femininity in film. She describes the power dynamics that can be introduced due to the nature of capturing an active subject on camera. According to Von Braun, “For the spectator, the feeling of supremacy created by identification with the view of the camera combines with a feeling of powerlessness, because the eye of the camera is determined by someone or something else (the director, camera, etc.). Thus, a double identification arises – on the one hand with the eye of the camera, i.e. the subject of the gaze, and on the other hand with the actors and the roles that they embody, i.e. the objects of the gaze, which, unlike the objects of the photograph, are perceived as an active subject” (25). Her observations regarding the role of power and control in the act of filming give valuable insights regarding how such aspects are embedded within the male gaze, and thus, cinema itself. As such, they provide an important aspect to consider during character analysis based on the male gaze in films.

Similarly, Doane’s book titled *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940’s* investigates topics of the female gaze as well as female spectatorship in Hollywood Cinema. Doane comments on women’s films and how movies targeted towards a female demographic may highly differ from ones that target men due to each gender’s difference in the ability to empathize with the main character. As stated, “the female gaze exhibits, in contrast to male distance, a proximity to the image which is the mark of overidentification and hence a heightened sympathy” (Doane 67). Doane compares the female gaze with the male one, identifying the former as one that allows spectators to engage with characters in cinema on a much closer emotional level than the latter does. Her insights on how uniquely the female gaze functions and how much it differs from the typical male gaze in cinema is vital to my research paper that also undergoes the same comparison. It provides crucial information pertaining to the definition of the female gaze and can thus be used to strengthen my study.

Likewise, Fan's paper titled "An Analysis of the Correct Use of Female Gaze from the Perspective of Gaze Theory -- A Case study of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*" investigates both a correct and an incorrect incorporation of the female gaze in cinema. Fan states in her paper that the female gaze differs widely from the male one due to an active presence of equality in gender dynamics. Fan establishes equality as an important element of the female gaze through analyzing the characters and their relationships present in the film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. As stated by her, "The female gaze is an excellent way to demonstrate equality by proposing equal power dynamics on-screen and breaking the conventional male gaze, thereby trying to improve equality in all aspects." (137). Fan also examines what she terms as the "Pseudo-female gaze", or movies that attempt to utilize the female gaze but ultimately reduce it to female characters still functioning in a male-gaze-centric narrative. She identifies qualities such as a failure to delve into the inner thoughts and feelings of female characters and merely representing them through stereotypes as those belonging to the "pseudo-female gaze". Fan's insights on what pertain to the female gaze and what ultimately is a failure of reproducing it in film are vital in establishing a proper definition of it for my thesis. Her analysis thus provides key information on my research paper that aims to compare and examine both the male and female gazes.

Uğuz's paper, titled "Tracing the Cinematic Female Gaze through Textual Film Analysis of *Something Useful* (2017)" similarly discusses the elements of the female gaze through analysis of *Something Useful*. Uğuz distinguishes the female gaze as incorporating female subjectivity and exploring female characters through a look at their inner thoughts and feelings, which humanizes them to the viewer. Uğuz also described the female gaze as "more a frame of mind, where approach to subject and material is more emotional and respectful", contrasting it with the male gaze, which she describes as something which "seeks to devour and control"

(123). Her insights on what constitutes as the female gaze and comparison to the male one helps build a strong definition of the former for my thesis. Uğuz's analysis thus allows for a better understanding of the female gaze, allowing it to be properly identified and acknowledged in movies and cinema.

By contrast, Devereaux, in her article, "Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers and the Gendered Spectator: The New Aesthetics", through the lens of feminist theory, identifies the male gaze as the result of a patriarchal society which is more prevalent in media. The article describes it clearly as what gives the male audience the power to behold the female characters as objects of desire. As stated by Devereux, the overtly male-dominant film industry is an extension of patriarchal practices and leads to the silencing of female voices due to the prominence of the former. She concludes that to counter the prevalence of male gaze media, which primarily objectifies the women and empowers the men, a new wave of media that caters to female consumers must be crafted. Devereux's observation and insights on the film industry provide vital information on uncovering the nature and history of the male gaze in cinema and what it encompasses, and as such is of great relevance to the topic of my research paper.

Eck in her article, "Men Are Much Harder: Gendered Viewing of Nude Images" describes the differing reactions of male and female audiences when presented with sexualized images of male and female nudity. She notes that images of female nudity are widely accepted by both male and female audiences. Male audiences are particularly accepting of female nudity, female audiences apprehend it and are noted to acknowledge the intention of female nudity for the male gaze. The article also concludes that male nudity has a much more alien and uncomfortable reaction for both audiences due to its rare occurrence in heterosexual media. Eck's article may give insight as to why male gaze media is so prevalent within Hollywood cinema and why it may

be hard to market cinema for the female gaze. Her article thus provides vital information on audience perceptions of different gazes and how gender roles and dynamics also play an important role.

By comparison, Denzin's article "Women at the Keyhole: Fatal Female Visions" describes Hollywood's failed attempt at creating movies with the female gaze, giving the examples of *Black Widow* (1986) and *Fatal Attraction* (1987). Both films feature female leads yet fail to avoid the male gaze. As a result, both films fail to give the female characters a strong agency despite the subversion of their passiveness. Denzin's article shows an attempt by the film industry to establish a cinema with the female gaze, though it is unsuccessful. It thus shows that consideration for gazes alternate to the male one is not entirely ignored even if the attempts are not executed properly. Denzin's article thus provides an example of the persistence of the male gaze even within movies that have a female protagonist while also showing how cinema may attempt at moving away from the male gaze.

Lastly, the article "'There's More Than One Way to Lose Your Heart': The American Film Industry, Early Teen Slasher Films, and Female Youth" by Nowell explores how the slasher film genre was expected to appeal to the traditional male audience but has elements that can appeal to the female demographic. He concludes that female youth were a vital audience for the American film industry's commercial objectives and using independent female protagonists and elements of heterosexual romance in their films appealed to that demographic. Notably, these elements are both present in *Bumblebee*. Nowell's paper reveals essential information on the film industry aiming to attract a female audience, as well as how certain cinematic elements draw out a more predominant female audience. As such, his paper provides key insights on audience reception pertaining to women and the female gaze, which thus strengthens my thesis.

The literature review in this thesis has thus explored multiple ways the male and female gazes manifest in cinema and what pertains to them. It also provides key information that help establish a stronger definition for the female gaze by recognizing recurring elements and cinematic techniques related to it. Furthermore, the scholarly articles also explore the patriarchal purpose of the male gaze as well as various audience reactions relate to both gazes.

Chapter 4.1

Michael Bay's *Transformers*: A Narrative Shaped by the Male Gaze

The *Transformers* trilogy, directed by Michael Bay can be analyzed as a series of films shaped and driven primarily through cinematic techniques that are dominated by the male gaze. The movies follow protagonist Sam Witwicky as he becomes unexpectedly involved in the secret war between two sects of robotic aliens, the heroic Autobots and the villainous Decepticons, both of whom can transform into machines and vehicles. Using Laura Mulvey's theoretical framework, one can analyze the effect of the male gaze in the films through psychoanalytically dissecting the treatment of the male and female characters, which includes Sam, his love interest Mikaela Banes as well as several other characters. The gaze is also manifested in filming techniques such as camera angles, character relevancy and the overall tone of the action-adventure sci-fi story.

The first film in Bay's *Transformers* trilogy, simply named *Transformers*, involves a teenage boy named Sam Witwicky who becomes entangled in a centuries-old war between opposing sides of an alien robot race as they battle on Earth for control of an important artifact: the powerful AllSpark. While the film offers a thrilling action-adventure tale filled with sacrifice and bravery, it is also frequently criticized for its overtly male-gaze-driven portrayal, particularly in the depiction of the female character, Mikaela Banes. According to Laura Mulvey, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly." (Mulvey 11). The role of female characters in cinema when determined by the male gaze, as defined by Mulvey, is one that provides visual gratification towards the bearer

of the gaze, who is male. The embodiment of this is found scattered throughout Michael Bay's *Transformers* films and is most prominently featured in Mikaela, played by Megan Fox. Mikaela is introduced in the first of Bay's Trilogy, *Transformers* (2007) as the romantic interest of Sam Witwicky and is framed as an attractive object of desire, who the latter wishes to "win" over. Since the film's opening hours Mikaela is filmed as a visual spectacle that is desired by the male protagonist, and in turn simulates the same feeling towards the audience, whom Sam can be seen as a surrogate to. Various examples include shots of Mikaela being perceived from Sam's perspective, focusing on her gait, her figure, or her expressions. As such, this frames Mikaela as a passive object of desire for a presumed male viewer, a central aspect of Mulvey's male gaze theory. Sam's attraction to Mikaela is explained by the narrative as him being smitten with her ever since both were in childhood, yet the film only shows his attraction to be physical based on the way the camera focuses primarily onto Mikaela's body and movement, particularly establishing this as Sam's gaze towards Mikaela. This dissonance between narration and cinematography is once again prevalent in the subsequent scene that establishes a deeper characterization for Mikaela. In (*Transformers* 00:25:21 - 00:25:58) Mikaela is seen explaining her origins to Sam, which deepens her characterization as a car lover and mechanic. The camera, however, slowly pans down to her body, focusing on her exposed abdomen as she holds the hood of Sam's car open. The overt sexualization of Mikaela and voyeuristic aspect of this scene is further highlighted by Sam's own reaction to Mikaela's attractiveness, as if guiding the audience specifically to focus on her figure, instead of the lines of dialogue she was stating. According to Mulvey, "Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" (809). This is

thus proven through Sam being used to highlight Mikaela's attractiveness as the sole focus for the audience. The nature of this particular scene, where a female character, having a moment of humanization is relegated to a passive, objectified role via camera angles and the male protagonist being an active participant of that objectification cements this scene as the epitome of the male gaze. Mikaela as a character is further revealed to have a complicated past, with a juvenile record and a criminal father. Her nuances however, though touched upon by the narrative, seem to be completely ignored in the movie, as her role in the further plot is merely that of support. Mikaela as a character follows the plot glued to the side by Sam. In moments of Sam's vulnerability, such as near the climax of the film, she acts as an emotional support granting him confidence and willpower. In this way, her role as a protagonist of the movie herself is still passive as she only performs actions to lift and strengthen the male protagonist. Her role is thus once again a passive one where she serves the active male protagonist, an aspect of the male gaze. It should be noted, however, that as a character she is seen to be independent and self-sufficient, yet any meaningful decisions she makes are never properly acknowledged. At a particular moment in the film (Transformers 04:19:09), Mikaela takes her own decision to act as support for the heroic character Bumblebee, helping him defeat aliens by utilizing her skills in driving to guide him. Her resourceful nature aides the heroes at a critical moment in battle. Yet neither the movie nor the characters ever acknowledge her risky feat, letting one of her few defining heroic scenes fade into irrelevancy. By the end of the first film Mikaela's appearance is once again the primary focus, as the ending scene highlights her curvaceous figure lying on top of Sam as they share an intimate moment. Her independent actions as a character taking her own decisions are thus consistently undermined by the camera's continual focus of her features, the movies themselves "struggle to give women a powerful gaze which overrides the male's look"

(Denzin 166). This pattern of undermining characteristics that construct Mikaela to be a more grounded character in favor of her physical appearance being consistently focused upon by the males' look is also found in Bay's next films, and as such is also an aspect of male gaze in cinema.

The direct sequel of the first film, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), once again involves the heroic Autobots fighting against the Decepticons to prevent them from reviving an ancient Transformer, known as the Fallen, which aims to destroy the Sun. Although still being given ample screentime, Mikaela's primary characterization in this film is one of a heavy, one-sided devotion, playing a largely supportive role for her now boyfriend Sam. She is once again introduced to the film using a voyeuristic angle that highlights her physical attractiveness to the audience, an aspect which is repeatedly visited but never relevant to the plot or themes of the movie. Like the first film, Mikaela's role is largely supportive and passive despite her being independent. Even though she is established as a mechanic, her skills remain irrelevant to the central focus of the story involving an alien invasion. Her supportive role is to merely be a source of emotional strength for the male protagonist, only taking crucial actions by his instructions and having no real goals of her own aside from supporting him. The only desire Mikaela expresses in the movie is having heard Sam directly expressing his love for her. Her dialogue in (*Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* 01:37: 27) describe her role in the film in one single line, a woman who had flown thousands of miles for her lover selflessly to keep him safe, a role which is the embodiment of support. It should be noted however, that despite all her deeds and her devotion towards her lover, the film never rewards Mikaela her one desire of hearing Sam state her love for her, something that is never critically brought to attention as a failure on the male protagonist's part. Mikaela's role in the second film can thus be summarized as

providing two things, being a visual spectacle for the presumed male audience and functioning as emotional support for the male protagonist, both of which are the embodiment of the male gaze. Her unrealistic, strong devotion which remains primarily one-sided can also be called an aspect of male-gaze-centered writing, as she can be described as “paradoxically self-absorbed” and as such “cannot have any emotional or intellectual connection to the external, wider world around them. They remain obscure objects of desire who are removed from reality, and whose existence is conferred on them only by the male gaze” (Cardullo 641). Her achievements and further character development are squandered and left to fade in irrelevancy, thus establishing her as a caricature framed primarily through the male gaze.

The irrelevancy of Mikaela Banes is best seen manifested in Bay’s third movie of the trilogy *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011), where her character is completely written out and replaced with a new love interest for Sam, Carly Spencer. Completely removing Mikaela from the narrative unceremoniously hence so far proves that Bay’s films only treat her as important only when involved with the protagonist. This is despite the fact that she had close encounters with the transformers, aided Sam in the previous films and is a proxy of an international secret involving the alien lifeforms. This dismissal is an embodiment of the objectification of women, discarding them when they are seen as unnecessary by the male-centered narrative, an aspect of male-gaze-centric writing. Her replacement, Carly, is similarly reduced to a visual spectacle, and arguably more so considering she had much less screentime to develop as a character. *Dark of the Moon* continues the trend of unnecessary sexualization of female characters, treating Carly as a visual spectacle for a presumed male audience despite her attractiveness being completely irrelevant to the movie’s narrative. Mikaela’s disposability and treatment as a character throughout the films and her quick replacement when she is no longer a

supportive role for the male lead is thus the embodiment of the problematic aspects of male-gaze-centered writing.

Mikaela Banes and Carly Spencer are not the only female characters involved in the film series whose writing is heavily influenced by the male gaze. The films see the involvement of a few other secondary female characters, including Maggie Madsen a senior data analyst. Maggie is seen playing a vital role in decoding signals from the Decepticons, the primary robotic alien antagonists, in the first film of the trilogy. Maggie, despite playing a crucial role in helping the protagonists and being characterized as resourceful and sharp is never seen in subsequent films. Other tech savvy characters, such as Leo Spitz seem to play similar roles, making Maggie's quick replacement similar to Mikaela's. Likewise, Carly Spencer, Sam's new girlfriend and Mikaela Banes' replacement plays a similar role to her predecessor. In *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011) she is introduced to the narrative rather abruptly, as if trying to establish she is the "right one" for Sam. Much like Mikaela her physical attractiveness is a heavy focus, with an antagonist even lusting after her. Unlike Mikaela however Carly is never given enough characterization to stand as an independent figure with her own traits and nuances, making her seem even more of an accessory to Sam than Mikaela. A similarity between all three female characters however is their physical attractiveness, something which seems to be a deliberate casting choice on Bay's part. All three young women follow conventional beauty standards. Multiple shots and angles focus on Mikaela and Carly as attractive "eye candy" for the assumed male audience. This even extends to multiple minor background characters, such as the female students seen in Sam's college in *Revenge of the Fallen*. The only female character with a long enough screentime who doesn't follow the same beauty standards is Sam's mother, an older woman playing a more comedic role. It can be concluded that due to the film being heavily

influenced by the male gaze, the female characters' beauty and attractiveness takes more importance than any meaningful characterization they might have that would enrich the story.

The effect of the male gaze in cinema also extends to the characterization of the male characters. Michael Bay's trilogy sees protagonist Sam Witwicky as the central main character that the events of the story revolve around. Among a cast of intriguing characters with complicated backstories, Sam's characterization feels relatively inoffensive and plain. Sam is unwillingly pulled into the plot simply because of a connection his grandfather established with the alien lifeforms in the past. He is written this way on purpose due to his role in being an audience surrogate "everyman" character. According to Mulvey, "As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence" (12). As such, Sam is as much of a stand-in for the presumed male audience than he is as an individual character. Sam's characterization supports this set-up as his position as an ordinary everyman, with no special skills nor interests nor complicated relationships, making it easy for the presumed male audience to enter his shoes. This can also be the reason why Sam Witwicky, in particular, was chosen to fulfill the male protagonist role, as opposed to someone like Major William Lennox, a military man with a pre-existing relationship and combat experience, as shown in the films. Lennox's characterization makes him a more fleshed-out character with an established family and relationships, which are also the same traits that make him unfit for the position of audience surrogate. The role of Sam's audience surrogacy also reframes romantic scenes with his love interests as those that serve the male audience, i.e, Mikaela and Carly serve as love interest for the presumed male audience, as much as they are for Sam in-story. This need to please the male

audience would further explain Sam's and his love interests' characterizations. Sam is written as an everyman, thrust into the world of intergalactic warfare and is elevated in status as a hero for humanity. His achievements in story can be more so defined as a way to make the presumed male audience watching the films feel the same experience for themselves by way of self-insertion. Sam being "rewarded" by beautiful girlfriends in the films played by attractive actresses is as much as the audience's rewards as his. The male gaze can thus affect the writing of male protagonists in a way that demands a need for a male audience stand-in to empower them and grant a fantasy fulfillment.

The narrative and cinematic choices present in the *Transformers* trilogy that reflect the male gaze can be concluded as being done on purpose for several factors. The director of the movies, Michael Bay has famously stated that he enjoyed making movies for a young male audience. As such, everything from the casting choices to the story elements are crafted in a way to engage a young male viewer for his films. The use of the male gaze in cinema thus reflects a tendency in the American movie industry to favor male audience's expectations and desires, even in films that are marketed towards the general audience.

Chapter 4.2

The Female Gaze in *Bumblebee* and its Outcomes

The movie *Bumblebee* (2014), written and directed by Travis Knight and Christina Hodson is a film set within the *Transformers* franchise that offers a look of what a similar story could be like if influenced by the female gaze. The movie features a female protagonist, Charlie Watson, and involves a strong bond that develops between her and the titular alien robot, Bumblebee, during a secret alien invasion that threatens the Earth. Unlike Michael Bay's directed *Transformers* trilogy which aligns with male-gaze-centric cinematic techniques and narrative themes, *Bumblebee* offers a sci-fi adventure designed from the perspective of a female protagonist grappling with her own challenges that highly differ from the ones seen in the trilogy. The movie's use of emotional bonds and female-centric character writing also call attention to how different the feminine counterpart of the male gaze can be.

Unlike the male gaze which had its established definition within Laura Mulvey's essay, the female gaze had not been given the same attention and thus had no universal definition to begin with. This may be explained by the patriarchal nature of Hollywood cinema and visual entertainment in general which favors media catered towards a male audience. As it has no strong established definition, the female gaze may be referring to a group of things, such as previously mentioned, a female audience. It can also refer to media created by a female author or featuring a female protagonist. Certain reoccurring traits and qualities can also be described as leaning towards the female gaze, such as a more grounded treatment of female characters and a prominent emphasis on strong emotional bonds. According to another scholar, "The female gaze concept does not seem to be the exact opposite of the male gaze concept developed decades ago

by Mulvey. It's not about asserting female dominance on screen, nor does it mean that we get to objectify men in reverse, as the male gaze does for female characters" (Uğuz 123). The female gaze thus sets itself apart from the rather voyeuristic approach of its male counterpart, where female characters were subjected to being looked upon as passive subjects. Female characters are thus framed as human beings that the audience may be able to empathize with them rather than see as visual spectacles. As explained by one scholar, "The female gaze, as opposed to the male gaze, treats women and some other characters as persons rather than depicting them casually. In the female gaze, female characters can avoid being gazed at by the male gaze. Furthermore, the theme of the female gaze is equality, and it promotes equal power dynamics on screen, whereas viewers will notice some inequalities between men and women, classes in male gaze films" (Fan 138). These qualities of the female gaze such as a more humanized female character and strong emotional bonds that are equal in dynamic can be observed in the movie *Bumblebee* (2014).

The protagonist of *Bumblebee* is Charlie Watson, a young woman of eighteen who is grappling with the loss of her father while her family has seamlessly moved on. Charlie, a fan of automobiles desperately wants one of her own, which causes her to encounter Bumblebee, a robotic alien Autobot who is missing his memories after landing on Earth. Charlie and Bumblebee form a strong emotional bond and confide in one another as a plot to overtake the Earth by the villainous Decepticons unfold. Charlie, as a character, provides a striking contrast between both Sam Witwicky and Mikaela Banes, the male protagonist and love interest of Michael Bay's *Transformers* trilogy. Unlike Sam who embodied the everyman trope with his lack of depth in backstory, Charlie embraces a more nuanced characterization. She is depicted as grieving the death of her father and is shown to be still emotionally stunted through the loss of him. Her relationship with her family members is also portrayed to be affected by her now

reserved nature, making her feel distant from her mother and awkward with her new stepfather. Beyond her grief, Charlie is seen having hobbies and goals, and undergoes development as the narrative moves forward, forming new relationships. By the end of the movie, Charlie is shown conquering her previously established fear of diving into water, having found strength and courage through her friendship with Bumblebee. Her portrayal as a protagonist grappling with complex emotions sets herself apart from Sam, who lacks many of the qualities she does. From the perspective of the audience, Charlie is written with the intention of the viewer feeling empathy towards her which contrasts Sam's role as a mere audience surrogate. Charlie's characterization can thus be concluded to be shaped by the female gaze because of her depth and nuances.

Charlie sets herself apart from Mikaela Banes as well, despite the two having similarities between them. Like Mikaela, Charlie is fond of automobiles and loves tinkering with them, having learnt from her father. Both characters can also be called self-sufficient and headstrong as they prove with their independent actions within each of their films. The similarities between them are only surface level however, as the way they are presented in their films results in one of their biggest differences. Mikaela in the films she is featured in is needlessly filmed through voyeuristic camera angles and sexualized multiples times. Her more humane aspects are undermined by the film's constant need to objectify her as a means of visual pleasure for the audience. None of this objectification is ever seen with Charlie, be it from a lack of panning shots that focus on her body or an absence of low-cut shirts in her wardrobe. Charlie is never subjected to sexualization and is always presented as a protagonist meant to be empathized with, rather than gazed at, an embodiment of the female gaze. The narrative always showcases Charlie's struggles as key emotional moments, setting her apart from Mikaela whose issue with

Sam was never taken seriously in *Revenge of the Fallen*. Another aspect that drives the difference between Charlie and Mikaela is their agency. Charlie, as protagonist, makes her own decisions which leads to the narrative being altered, showing that her actions do have consequences in the story. Mikaela, though shown to be capable of acting independently ultimately plays the passive role in the overall scheme, following Sam through the plot wherever the narrative takes them. Furthermore, unlike Mikaela whose actions are seldom brought to attention nor rewarded, Charlie's heroic feats are given proper attention in the movies, being shot with suspense and eventually lead to fruitful outcomes that benefit the heroes. The female gaze thus results Charlie's characterization to differ from Sam and Mikaela in two key aspects, leading her to have a more fleshed-out story as a protagonist and having actual agency which is rewarded as a female character in an action film.

A third aspect of the female-gaze-centric writing could be described as a large focus on emotional bonds and connections. While this can lead to generalizations, as stated by the author, "Female spectatorship is generally understood in its alignment with other qualities culturally ascribed to the woman—in particular, an excess of emotion, sentiment, affect, empathy. That is why women's films are often referred to as "weepies." From this perspective, the female gaze exhibits, in contrast to male distance, a proximity to the image which is the mark of overidentification and hence a heightened sympathy. But the concept of sympathy is a physiological/ medical one as well, of particular interest to the female subject" (Doane 67). As Doane explains it, media catered towards women are often dismissed as having "too much emotion", yet narrative fiction is often carried and driven by emotional characters. An emotional story may indeed be seen as compelling if the execution is handled with enough skill and care. Emotionally driven narratives do have an appeal towards the female demographic, and as such

can be concluded to be part of the female gaze. This can be seen in *Bumblebee*, which, by stark contrast of Bay's trilogy, embraces emotional storytelling with a core focus of the film featuring Charlie and Bumblebee's friendship. This emotional bond between the two is never irrelevant, but rather, strengthens both Charlie and Bumblebee, allowing both to grow and accomplish their own individual goals. Charlie Watson in particular becomes more open and confident after befriending the alien, allowing her to also make other connections, such as with her implied love interest, Memo. Due to her deep bond she forged with Bumblebee, Charlie is shown to overcome fears and undergo much maturity by becoming a stronger version of herself as seen in the ending. Bumblebee is also able to protect the Earth as his intended mission, and with Charlie's aid, able to access his lost memories, and most importantly, gain a voice. It should also be noted that the relationship between Charlie and Bee is one with an equal power dynamic where neither is presented as more dominant than the other. The female gaze thus allows strong emotions to be a driving force for both the central characters, allowing them to grow, mature and achieve a stronger potential. By sharp contrast, Bay's male-gaze-centric *Transformers* trilogy lacks the same emotional depth in its storytelling. This especially apparent in the relationship between each protagonist and Bumblebee. Sam Witwicky, who is closest to the robotic alien in Bay's trilogy often treats him the same way one would treat a pet. Sam's relationship with the transformer is written as an alliance formed out of necessity for survival rather than a genuine heartfelt friendship, which makes him the opposite of Charlie Watson. The narrative never brings much focus to Sam and Bee's relationship, making his role as the human connection between the aliens and people of Earth feel much hollower. Another striking comparison made between the movies is their treatment of the protagonists' love interests. While Mikaela, and later, Carly is famously objectified under the male gaze and sexualized for visual pleasure, Charlie's love

interest, Memo is portrayed as an incredibly down-to-earth ordinary teenage boy. This in part can be explained by each gaze's stance on status, as "the theme of the female gaze is equality, and it promotes equal power dynamics on screen, whereas viewers will notice some inequalities between men and women, classes in male gaze films" (Fan 138). This theme of equality is evident in the important relationships in *Bumblebee*. The female gaze thus allows an equal bond for Charlie to form in her friendship with the titular alien, as well as with Memo. This contrasts with Bay's trilogy, where Sam's relationships suffered from the lack of the same level of status.

In conclusion, the female gaze, though not as solid in its definition, allows for story and character writing to develop in ways significantly different to its male counterpart. Elements of the female gaze include a humanized treatment of female characters, allowing the audience to empathize with their feelings and a more equal showcasing of gender dynamics in the film. *Bumblebee* showcases this evidently with the portrayal of Charlie Watson, whose character development and relationships are written with depth. Instead of serving as a mere audience surrogate, the female gaze allows for Charlie to be the protagonist with her own agency and nuances as well as forming relationships with emotional authenticity and equality. It thus establishes itself as much more different than its male counterpart by allowing a fairer treatment of female characters that humanize them instead of presenting them as objectified caricatures for the pleasure of the audience.

Chapter 4.3

The Male and Female Gaze: Patriarchal Normativity and Audience Receptions

As established by the previous points discussed in this paper, the male and female gazes are their own unique ways of developing a narrative through cinema, with the former being much more recurring than the latter. Observed by Laura Mulvey in her essay, the male gaze often resorts to a voyeuristic approach in filming women, framing them as sexual objects for audience gratification. This practice, however, though unfair in terms of gender dynamics across cinema, is an established norm that is shown little resistance. It can be argued then that the gaze of the voyeuristic heterosexual man had become the “default” gaze. It should be noted, however, that the dominant gaze of cinema is male even throughout the presence of female writers and cast members. As stated, “What does it mean then to say that at this level the gaze is male? It means that despite the presence of women directors and screenwriters, the institutions of filmmaking remain largely populated by men. Not all films have male authors, but whoever makes movies must work nonetheless within a system owned and operated by men. At the level of the filmmaker, then, men do not always do the looking, but they generally control who does. The male gaze is not always male, but it is always male dominated.” (Devereaux 339). As such, due to the patriarchal nature of filmmaking institutions, the male gaze is largely widespread, seen as default and is seldom resisted. This can have problematic implications due to the scopophilic tendencies of male-gaze-centric writing that, as established previously, reduce women to an objectified passive role. Feminist movements, however, have urged a revision of such roles for women in film and thus may be credited for the emerging trend of the female gaze being present in movies that previously had a long tradition of being male-centric. Such can thus be observed

in *Bumblebee* (2018), a movie that is part of a franchise which heavily embodied the male gaze in its series of films. Audience reception for each gaze may also be split, due to the normalization of the male and rare occurrence of the female. Regardless, a growing trend of female-centric writing proves that the female gaze can be a powerful tool for a more balanced approach in storytelling in terms of gender dynamics, despite the dominance of its male counterpart. The male gaze's history and domination in cinema can thus be seen as an extension of patriarchal norms while its female counterpart's existence can be seen to counter these same norms, producing audience reactions which are shaped by societal values and expectations.

According to Laura Mulvey, "The cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, but it also goes further, developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect" (8). The medium of cinema in Mulvey's essay has been described to be one that grants a self-fulfillment fantasy of the audience, explained as a narcissistic aspect. This aspect of cinema is steeped heavily into the male gaze, where the audience comes to identify with the often-male protagonist, not to empathize but to directly insert themselves into his shoes. This aspect can be seen in cinema through narrative and visual techniques, and as established before, is also heavily present within the *Transformers* trilogy. The usual male protagonist is the one the story centers around. Cinematic techniques often show his point-of-view, allowing for easier identification. The "narcissistic" aspect comes from a feeling of empowerment the presumed male viewer gets when the male main character on-screen is also empowered. Typically, this empowerment may come from plot elements, but as is a central aspect of the male gaze, dominance over female characters also results in it. Be it through framing female characters in an objectifying manner or reducing them to more passive roles, it serves to empower the male protagonist, and as such, the male viewer. The patriarchal nature of the film-industry also fuels this practice and gives rise to

cinema that serve less as a visual story-telling medium and more of a tool to entertain the heterosexual male fantasy. The normalization of the male gaze as the “default” thus stems from this practice being less criticized. It should be noted that the male audience is not the only ones affected by the male gaze, rather Cinema attributes the position of the spectator as “behaving male”, thus the gaze affects all audience members regardless of gender. As further mentioned by Mulvey, “The magic of the Hollywood style at its best (and of all the cinema which fell within its sphere of influence) arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure” (Mulvey 6). This further stresses that Hollywood cinema and the aspect of visual pleasure stemming from the male gaze had always been closely intertwined. The male gaze being treated as the default gaze and being normalized so heavily within film-industries is not without consequences. It, first and foremost, reinforces patriarchal domination through its usage in cinema. Presenting the male as the active participant and women in objectified, passive roles imposes those very same values into audience members.

Internalizing values that lead to a distorted image of women can have the consequence of both men and women viewing the female form as being sexual in nature by default. This in particular may have lasting consequences on women as “For women, female nudes are objects to be studied, viewed, judged, and, above all, used as a comparison for the self--‘her stomach looks like mine,’ and ‘I need to lose 10 pounds myself.’ Women both view the image and respond as if the image represents a part of themselves being viewed” (Eck 698). Lastly, the prominence of the male gaze and its ready acceptance amongst audience members may lead to a feeling of alienation when they are presented with other gazes that fail to reinforce the same values. This may thus cause stories that are written from the perspective of the female gaze to not be received as well or be further criticized. These very same critics may have accepted the patriarchal norms

established by the male gaze regarding the way both genders are presented in film. Alternate structures of storytelling would thus be heavily dismissed in favor of supporting old norms entrenched in patriarchal normativity. The male gaze can thus be concluded to be a historical system that exposes the patriarchal side of film-industries, cause distorted values to be internalized and limit alternative perspectives to immerse in cinema.

The rise of the female gaze in cinema can be seen as the abandonment of older norms entrenched in patriarchal film-making practices. This, however, is not met with little resistance. As stated, “The male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like. Hence the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man’s role as the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen. The man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator” (Mulvey 12). Mulvey observes that any form of gaze that deviates from the norms set by the male gaze is often resisted by the male audience, particularly when the gender roles of sexual objectification are reversed. The female gaze itself, which may give agency to female characters and show how they view the world and view male figures may thus be regarded negatively by male audience members who are used to the male gaze. This form of storytelling that is female-centric may be perceived as a “threat” to previously established norms that prevented female characters from owning any agency. Furthermore, though sexualization of women is common amongst male-gaze-centric cinema and is thus readily accepted as normal to audience members, sexualization of the male figure is not. As it has a broader definition, the female gaze does not necessarily always employ male sexualization, but when it does, it results in a feeling of alienation from male audience members. This mixed reception can be seen as a reaction to power that was always given and promised to male roles being stripped away.

Another point to consider is the reaction of women when they are presented images of male nudity. As put by Eck, “Women are just learning to be voyeurs. Although women may be more accustomed to seeing male bodies, they are not as accustomed to having those bodies ‘offered’ to them” (694). When presented with male nudity in the same voyeuristic fashion as the female form is treated, women feel a level of discomfort. This may in turn be the result of male nudity never being as sexualized as the female form. Men however view sexualized male nudity with much firmer rejection, and never the level of self-evaluation that women do when presented with female nudity. As patriarchal norms dominate society, it in turn controls which gender’s image should be viewed as more sexual. The rejection from men and unsure discomfort from women when presented with sexualized depictions of men merely suggests the domination of the male gaze and its prevention of any alternative gaze.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

To conclude, this research paper has thoroughly analyzed the Transformers trilogy and Bumblebee and examined the character construction through the lens of the male and female gazes. Utilizing Laura Mulvey's gaze theory, this thesis has analyzed the main characters of the Transformers trilogy and concluded aspects of it which falls under male-gaze-centric writing. Other scholarly articles have also reinforced a definition of the female gaze which this study identifies in Bumblebee within the writing of the protagonist Charlie Watson. Furthermore, this paper has also delved into the origins and patriarchal nature of the male gaze as well as audience perception when exposed to both gazes.

Utilizing textual analysis, this thesis has used Mulvey's theory of the male gaze to study the characters of Sam Witwicky and Mikaela Banes from the Transformers trilogy. The examination reveals several aspects of the male gaze influencing the construction of the characters, as well as narrative and cinematic techniques. Mulvey's theory helped identify the shallow portrayal of Mikaela as a female character and provide insight on how Sam's own position serves less as an individual within the story and more as an audience surrogate. These findings help establish the male gaze as something that lacks equality in portrayal of characters of both genders and exist largely to grant a presumed male audience visual pleasure through female sexualization. Furthermore, this thesis has helped solidify the role of patriarchal practices in the prominence of the male gaze in cinema and identifies the bias in the film industry that prioritizes the male audience.

The study also establishes the element of strong emotional connections to be an important aspect of the female gaze as observed within *Bumblebee*. Through analysis of the protagonist Charlie Watson, this paper's findings indicate that the female gaze is responsible for a more humanized portrayal of women, especially when compared to its male counterpart. By opting for more emotionally vulnerable scenes and including more nuances to their origins, the female gaze is observed to allow for better representation of women in film, free from sexualized, passive roles. The findings of the study also reveal that the female gaze opts for more equal dynamics to exist between relationships formed, in contrast to the male gaze. This thesis has also delved into looking at audience perceptions of the female gaze, as well as help establish it as a gaze that overturns the patriarchal practices of the male-dominant film industry.

While this thesis critically looks at cinema and film industry's usage and lack of the male and female gaze respectfully, its findings can also help identify similar patterns in other genres of literature. Furthermore, this research may also add to a more solid definition of the female gaze and help highlight it as an alternative gaze that should be considered during the creation process of films and literature in general.

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