Searching for the Female Spectator in *Broken Blossoms*

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**ABSTRACT**

By the late-silent era, Classical structures codified film narratives for the male gaze, yet D.W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* (1919) is a curious case-study. Contemporaneous to the turbulent erosion of separate gendered spheres - due to women entering the workplace, the expansion of consumer culture, and the suffragette movement - *Broken Blossoms* (as is the case with several other films) emerges, offering novel patterns of identification for a potential female spectator. This essay examines the film’s narrative and shot design in order to demonstrate how these patterns of looks–both of male characters within the diegesis as well as the gaze of the filmmaker’s camera–wrestle with the construct of the male gaze in its formal aesthetic choices, while contextualizing *Broken Blossoms* via overlap with romance novels for female spectatorship.

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As the vast landscape of feminist film theory argues, cinema came to fruition while catering to an active male gaze. By the late-silent era, Classical structures codified narratives for this male gaze, yet D.W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* (1919) is a curious case-study. Contemporaneous to the turbulent erosion of separate gendered spheres due to women entering the workplace, the expansion of consumer culture, and the suffragette movement, several films such as *Broken Blossoms* emerge that offer novel potential patterns of identification for a new female spectator. An examination of the film’s narrative and shot design demonstrates patterns of looks – both of male characters within the diegesis, as well as the gaze of the filmmaker’s camera – and wrestles with the construct of the male gaze in its formal aesthetic choices while contextualizing *Broken Blossoms* via overlap with romance novels for female spectatorship.

This period, which coincided with the mid-to-late silent era, saw the evolution of New Women who “tied female modernity to a particular lifestyle. They did not sit at home…they went out to play” (Søland 16). As a filmmaker, D.W. Griffith was concerned with reflecting this New Woman. Simmon writes of Griffith that women “were central to his career-long project… [and that] their rapidly changing roles were both a worry and a dramatic opportunity” (19). *Broken Blossoms* is no exception. In it, fifteen-year-old Lucy Burrows (Lillian Gish), decidedly not a New Woman, is routinely abused by her father, Battling (Donald Crisp), until she is rescued by Cheng Huan (Richard Barthelmess), an Asian immigrant. Huan falls for the girl as she recuperates in his care. Battling discovers this, believes her and Huan to have engaged in a sexual relationship, and kills Lucy in a wild rage. As revenge, Huan kills Battling and then himself. It is melodrama of the highest order. In fact, the first title card reads, “[w]e may believe there are no Battling Burrows, striking the helpless and brutal whip…perhaps [this film] may carry a message.” It is clear that Griffith is asserting a message that relates to the ideological preoccupation with a potential need for a new type of cinematic identification for female spectators. Yet, the construction of Lucy’s narrative struggles to provide her the necessary agency to fully develop into an independent female character.

Looking to how Lucy functions within the film’s narrative and formal design requires starting with feminist film theory. As Laura Mulvey famously wrote regarding...
Classical narrative construction, “[t]he presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (837). Considering Broken Blossoms within this framework is where the potentiality of female spectatorship initially emerges. While the image of Lucy does seem designed to function for male pleasure, Broken Blossoms offers a narrative driven specifically by Lucy’s victimization where “the alternating brutalization and idealization of the woman flourishes across the texture of the film” (Flitterman-Lewis 5). As such, Lucy does not interrupt the narrative flow; she is the narrative flow. By situating Lucy in the role of protagonist, her plight becomes the design of the narrative arc.

Consequently, traditional identification with a male protagonist destabilizes. Normally, “attitudes [of] aggression, power, and control” foster male identification (Neale 11). However, while Battling possesses many of the rugged qualities that defined male heroes of the early 20th century, his actions paint him as a brutal villain, thus hindering narcissistic identification for male spectators. Virtually by default, Lucy assumes the mantle of protagonist as she displaces male characters from typical power roles. This subversion seems to mirror the socio-cultural context of the time, in that many men were now subordinate to others in the workforce, to the assertive New Woman, and to mollycoddling mothers (Studlar 29).

An open question still remains as to whether Lucy, as protagonist, is afforded enough agency to drive a typical cause-and-effect narrative, or whether the choices of the men surrounding her seem to shuttle Lucy through the narrative’s progression.

Despite the film’s implicit move towards identification with Lucy, there are moments where the film’s mise-en-scène underscores more traditional gendered dynamics that work against female spectatorship by consistently presenting Lucy’s female form for an active male gaze. In these instances, Griffith appears to undermine the agency of Lucy’s narrative. Often her body is eroticized in scenes with Battling; her abuse is coded as rape. Rape as a narrative device is so common in “American cinema that one cannot fully understand cinema itself without addressing [it]” (Projansky 63). In one key scene, Lucy finds Battling quite angry, scolding. She responds by fixing his dinner. When she accidentally spills food, Battling grabs a whip. Lucy shivers with fear and claims she spots dirt on his boots, kneeling to clean them. He drags her beside the home’s singular bed, which frames the background of the shot, and strikes. It is a powerful moment in the middle of the film – one of brutal violence (male on female; father on daughter) with subtext hinting at incest and abuse of power. Frankly, it is a moment that dramatically represents how cinema has molded and positioned women in front of the camera.

There are moments in the film where traditional objectification of the female form takes place and where Battling both figuratively and literally dominates Lucy within the narrative (Fig. 1 and 2). In the first shot, the panic on Lucy’s wide eyes and her shrinking physicality demonstrate the fear she exudes in her father’s presence. Then, when Lucy bends to clean Battling’s shoes, “the change in composition…connotes the act of fellatio… [and] ‘we see orgiastic shots of Battling beating her senseless…with the phallus-like whip handle’” (Lesage 7); the whipping is severe (Fig. 2).

Lucy is then rescued and cared for by Cheng Huan. The two sequences juxtapose brutality and tenderness and through this parallel syntagma emerges. “Lucy, as desired object, is the stake in a struggle between two
conflicting worlds – two modes of masculine behaviour – and most of its sequences portray her either being beaten or adored” (Fliterman-Lewis 10). Throughout the Huan sequence, Lucy becomes the object of Huan’s ‘look’ much as she had been the object of her father’s. “The issue of rape [again] emerges. The film depicts both working-class and Asian men as rapists, even though the Asian man simultaneously functions as an ineffectual savior” (Projansky 72). Huan advances on Lucy, lurking towards her with sinister countenance, the intention of assault clear. This dominance is on display where Huan is situated centre frame, Lucy relegated to the frame’s edge, cowering and fearful (Fig. 3). Then, inexplicably, Huan stops himself. Interestingly, what seems an unmotivated action has roots in another medium with the potential to subvert the male gaze and provide a more progressive identification for female spectators.

It has been argued that the melodrama film is closely related to the romance novel, both of which emerged during the late silent era. Janice Radway’s extensive research has mined the romance novel to locate female identification and finds “the[se] stories…are exercises in the imaginative transformation of masculinity to conform with female standards”, and that these transitions are “not structurally explained by the narrative…[they] simply take place” (147). This applies well to Broken Blossoms. Though Huan has been established as morally weak, succumbing to his vices in the opium den and voyeuristically spying on Lucy, when instilled with Lucy’s love, he self-actualizes into a female conception of a masculine ideal. Might it be, as Miriam Hansen suggests for other films during this period, that the “unstable and destabilizing force of the female gaze exceeds and impairs even the power of an aggressive masculinity?” (158). The power of Lucy’s look would certainly suggest so (Fig. 3).

Therefore, does Broken Blossoms root a new female spectatorship in patterns/models such as those of the romance novel? Attempting to read Broken Blossoms through a lens of female spectatorship remains problematic since the gaze of male characters is so often
thrust upon Lucy; her image is consistently infantilized, maternalized, or both simultaneously, as evidenced when Lucy plays with a doll (Fig. 4). Additionally, the narrative punishes Lucy with death. Yet, still, we cannot discount – even momentarily – that Lucy’s gaze has transformative power over the men around her.

Somewhere in the nexus of the emerging New Woman, melodrama cinema, and the romance novel, the ephemeral notion of a female spectator exists.

It may not be complete in offering the equivalent of an active male gaze, but it is unique in establishing a more psychologically complex female protagonist who catalyzes a transformation of aggressive masculinity into something far more appropriate: domestication. The power of this conversation lies in Griffith’s interests in race, class, and gender, and this conversation continues to situate Broken Blossoms as a powerful case study of what might have been from early silent cinema.

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WORKS CITED


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