THE BIG SCREEN AND THE BIG COVER-UP: Missing the Female Gaze in *Jane Eyre*

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An adaptation of literature into film is an interpretive choice and the production of a particular cultural stance. It is also a translation of the literary into a cinematic language made up of camera movements and different shots, the juxtaposition of images through editing and other visual and sound elements, including the relationship of image and speech. The manipulation of cinematographic or literary language is informed by the presence of social and cultural codes of which the reader/spectator makes use to transform the aesthetic structure of the work into discourse.

Feature films are reflections of the composite psychology of a collaborative group that is hoping for its product to appeal to a large generic mass of consumers. The production of cinema involves the interaction of money, people, and time in a mainstream consumer system which caters largely to the dominant culture and sustains it. In order to be economically successful, cinema must concern itself with the subjectivity of the spectator, who, in a patriarchal culture, is constructed as male. The translation of a 19th-century novel written by a woman into a feature film is worthy of cultural study, especially because of the gendered implication of the different means of production.

Charlotte Brontë’s novel Jane Eyre, published in 1847, is a complex work that evokes strong critical response, and its ambivalent treatment of the self-reliant heroine has been articulated by many feminist critics. Judging Jane by plot alone shows her to be rebellious and independent when young, and courageous enough to leave the oppressive Lowood Institution to become economically self-sufficient as a governess. In this first half of the novel, Jane is the prototypical career woman: unmarried, determined and resourceful.

However, many feminist critics have argued that Jane’s relationship with Rochester, her employer at Thornfield, is a recuperative device which foregrounds the theme of romantic love. They argue that romantic love is the cultural construct by which female desire is rendered subservient to male lack. In simple terms, it is Rochester’s need for Jane which causes her to fall prey to love, a situation that threatens both her emotional equilibrium and her moral principles. Although Brontë insists that her heroine remain true to her principles, rejecting Rochester’s attempted bigamy, the end of the novel seems to satisfy reader’s expectations by portraying a vision of domestic bliss in which the formerly rebellious and independent Jane becomes a happy and nurturing stepmother and wife, caretaker to the now-blind Rochester.

The blinding of Rochester serves to point out the crucial importance of the gaze in Jane Eyre.1 The romantic reunion at the end of the novel only occurs after Jane has attained financial independence and the domineering Rochester has been physically humbled. It is the historical context and cultural discourse of the dominant culture which creates the structural boundaries of the novel; however, Brontë subverts this structure by creating spaces in which female subjectivity is momentarily uncolonized. It is in these moments, in which Jane looks out from the attic, “safe in the silence and the solitude of the spot,” that she opens her “mind’s eye” and her “inward ear” to her own story: “a tale my imagination created, and narrated continuously; quickened with all of incident, life, fire, feeling that I desired and had not in my actual existence.”2 The coupling of Jane’s act of solitary gazing with her own impelling narrative of desire is a crucial juncture in Brontë’s text which brings to mind the question originally posed by feminist film theorist E. Ann Kaplan in response to Laura Mulvey’s article on “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema,” i.e., “Is the gaze male?”3

For, if the gaze of the dominant culture expressed in cinematic language is indeed male, then Brontë’s exploration of female subjectivity suggests a correlative female gaze, a subversive counter to the male gaze, here expressed in literary language. I would argue that there could be a space for a female gaze within the technical boundaries of cinematic language, but that the conservatism of cinema is based on its economic dependence on a male-dominant culture. To fully understand Brontë’s use of the female gaze as a means of foregrounding female subjectivity, I find it useful to examine its conspicuous absence.

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in two 20th-century “readings” of Jane Eyre. An analysis of the film adaptations shows the importance of the female gaze by the stereotypes which result from its omission. I have limited my study to feature-length films, neglecting the lengthier television mini-series produced by the BBC. The first sound film made of Jane Eyre was produced in 1934 by Monogram Studios, directed by Christy Cabanne and starring Colin Clive as Rochester. I have yet to see this version or to find out who actually played Jane (ed. note: Virginia Bruce). That leaves the more recent television version of Jane Eyre starring George C. Scott, and the earlier Orson Welles version, which begs the question: “Where is Jane?”

Brontë’s means of production (pen and paper) foregrounds the direct involvement of female subjectivity with the text. The 19th-century novel is a genre in which issues of female identity and domesticity were explored by women writers working out of their homes. Cinema, by contrast is a genre that is produced not by one subjectivity, but by many, despite attempts to retrieve a single “auteur” in the interests of film history and the working environment is definitely not a domestic one.

The Films

The 1944 version of Jane Eyre, directed by Robert Stevenson, stars Orson Welles, Joan Fontaine, Margaret O’Brien, Agnes Moorehead, and Elizabeth Taylor. It is in black and white with voice-over narration. The 1971 Delbert Mann directed Jane Eyre is a British made-for-television, color version starring Susannah York and George C. Scott. I will discuss important deviations of plot and structure but focus my analysis on Rochester’s proposal of marriage and its aftermath. During the garden scene, Jane’s vehement declaration of equality in the face of Rochester’s proposal is a crucial point in the novel; Brontë subsequently explores the cultural trappings of romantic love in the ambivalence of Jane’s reaction to her impending marriage. Both of these scenes are realized in the films in a way that reinstates the dominance of the male gaze and reinforces the subordinate position of the female.

The Characters (1944)

The 1944 version of Jane Eyre is full of dark shadows emphasizing the Gothic aspects of Brontë’s story. The Stevenson adaptation reflects both film noir and Victorian preoccupations with the two sides of woman, presenting Jane as a somewhat tearful, sexually repressed angel, and Bertha as the irrational, mysterious, and passionate demon. The film asserts its textual authority by highlighting passages of a book to accompany Jane’s (Joan Fontaine) narration; however, the text is not taken from Brontë’s novel but written by screenplay writers Aldous Huxley, John Houseman, and Robert Stevenson. As a representative of a false text, Jane’s role as fictional author and reliable narrator is problematic from the start. The film’s narration removes her from the site of production leaving only a re-interpretation many times removed from a real female author as a representation of the texts “authority.”

The most interesting plot deviation is the transformation of Miss Temple, Jane’s friend and female mentor at Lowood, into the male Dr. Rivers who advises Jane that

Duty is what you have to do even though you don’t want to...it is not every young woman who can face the world single-handed, but you know what right is and will stick to it through thick and thin.

Dr. Rivers supplants Brontë’s description of female solidarity and friendship by emphasizing the qualities of individualism and honor evinced in the figure of the Western hero. As Rochester, Orson Welles dominates the snowy landscape of Thornfield in dramatic fashion: long cape billowing in the wind, brusque speech, and confident movements. The adult Jane is increasingly quiet, shy, tearful, and passive. Bertha is not seen except in shadow, the rattling of doors and her shrieks making it impossible to consider her humanity. St. John Rivers is left out entirely, so that Jane has nowhere to turn from being on her own except back to Rochester. A passionate kiss at the film’s end reunites Jane and the blind, but obviously virile, Rochester in traditional roles.
The Proposal (1944)

At the beginning of the garden scene, we see Jane, standing alone, framed by the garden wall with its clinging vines. Rochester enters from an unenclosed space off screen, coming through the archway leading into the garden. He enters into her space, relieving the claustrophobia of her abjection. Jane looks down and away from him, unable to contain her emotions in his presence, and her averted gaze is emphasized again in close-up, with a reverse shot of him looking directly at her. This is a particularly characteristic framing device in this film, as Jane is the object of Rochester’s intense scrutiny. As Kaja Silverma, writes:

The most paradigmatic of all shot/reverse shot formations is that which aligns the female body with the male gaze. This two-shot not only covers the absent site of production, but places the male subject on the side of vision, and the female subject on the side of spectacle.

Rochester plays a kind of cat and mouse game with her then, leading her to believe that she must soon leave Thornfield. He asserts his dominance over Jane’s emotions by positioning himself on some steps above her. We see Jane from his point of view, made vulnerable by a high-angle medium shot of her anguish. Rochester’s face also eclipses her vision in extreme close-ups with a background of twigs and sky. He reflects the freedom of open space, while Jane is closed in by her obsession for him.

Rochester is the dominant visual figure in this scene, and we see the contrast between them in a full two-shot: He is 3/4 turned with back to camera, looking at Jane, his hands in pockets spreading open his large overcoat, making his figure seem even more broad and powerful; Jane is 1/2 turned to him, still unable to meet his eyes, her hands clutching a book, limiting their mobility. These opening shots have effectively established Rochester’s gaze as the dominant, active force in this relationship. He has also manipulated her emotions through his speech, and he lies to her about his marriage to Blanche and Jane’s necessary departure. They go to sit across from each other at a stone bench, and there we hear Rochester’s “Adam and Eve” story and Jane’s only coherent, self-initiated speech in this crucial scene.

The story which Rochester tells is of the string which attaches their ribs together, a cord of communion which would be snapped if Jane was to leave. In two reverse shots Jane is framed by the stone bench, and Rochester is shown with a background of vines and sky. Rochester’s role as initiator and free agent is emphasized in contrast to the immobility which surrounds her cinematic image. In Brontë’s novel, Jane’s reply is not simply the reply of a woman trapped by romantic love, but an intimation of aspiring intellectuality and feminism:

I love Thornfield...because I have lived in it a full and delightful life...I have not been trampled on. I have not been petrified. I have not been buried with inferior minds, and excluded from every glimpse of communion with what is bright, and energetic, and high. I have talked, face to face, with what I revere; with what I delight in—with an original, a vigorous, an expanded mind... [255].

Of course, Brontë’s Jane is referring to Mr. Rochester, but in the film her truncated words reflect only a fated romantic obsession without a rational base: “I see the necessity of going, but it is like looking on the necessity of death.” The screenplay presents a version of Jane without Rochester that can only reflect her inadequacy without him. Is this the “verisimilitude” that Hollywood aspires to, in which woman’s castration is naturalized? Jane’s incapacity for looking or speaking authoritatively results in the loss of her own subjectivity within the film.

Her next speech, spoken in sobs, is robbed of the Brontean voice that speaks of spiritual equality and passion, becoming a tearful plea of the inadequate female:
Do you think because I am poor and obscure and plain that I am soulless and heartless?...If God had gifted me with wealth and beauty, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you...

Jane turns away, but Rochester is able to transform her inadequacy into the desire to be possessed, her lack made to fulfill his need:

You strange, you almost unearthly thing that I love as my own flesh... It's you that I want...Say Edward, I'll marry you. Say it, say it quickly.

The music swells and the sky darkens as Rochester's powers come into their own, eclipsing Jane's resistance by making her the object of his desire. She reads his face, recognizing his need, his desire, his phallic power to make her signify. The Stevenson Jane is swept away in a Gothic romance with thunder, wind, swirling leaves, and a wild crescendo of music as lightning strikes the chestnut tree. The scene ends in a longshot as the two embrace, Jane enveloped in Rochester's overwhelming embrace.

The Characters (1971)

The 1971 version of Jane Eyre attempts to make the characters more believable by contemporary standards. It omits Jane's experiences with the Reeds and begins with her arrival at Lowood. Bertha is made visible, obviously insane, but psychotic and unfortunate rather than monstrous. St. John Rivers is included, emphasizing Jane's return to Rochester as a matter of personal choice. However, Jane's relationship with Diana and Mary at Moorhouse is trivialized, whereas in Bronte's text it provided vital intellectual and female solidarity. The film ends at Ferndean, portraying a relationship made equal as a result of Rochester's weaknesses. Ironically, this emphasis on Rochester's fallibility and depression allows his point of view to dominate the film.

The Proposal (1971)

The more cheerful setting and conversational tone of the garden scene in Mann's version lead the spectator into believing that romantic love is simply a matter of choice, a rational decision agreed upon between two adults. The garden is full of lush greenery and promise, the birds are singing, and the camera moves along with Rochester and Jane as they enter into its sanctuary as equals at first, sitting together on one bench. Rochester begins to move into a position of dominance by establishing his need for her, saying, "I count on you, more than you know." He attempts to align Jane with his own desire by constructing a story in which he is able to disavow his connection to his wife Bertha while simultaneously idealizing Jane:

Advise me, Jane...A young man commits a capital error, I don't say crime, error...the only escape is exile and senseless pleasure...and then he meets a woman, a fine woman with qualities he has not met with in twenty years...Only convention stands in the way...Can he ask her to defy it?

Bertha is, much like Rochester's description of himself, an exile who seeks escape through senseless pleasure but ends up imprisoned by convention. Rochester sees in Jane the possibility of realizing his completion in her; she is everything that he is not. When Rochester mentions the existence of a woman who can fill his lack, he looks up and away from Jane, who had been gazing at him steadily, and now looks down. Because he feels trapped by his marriage to Bertha, Rochester is unable to assume the full power of the male gaze with Jane. He must establish the symbolic right to desire her as a wife, which he will do through the manipulation of language.

Jane answers plainly, "We are each responsible to God for our actions—I do not think we can ask others to share the burden," but she still adopts the proper female response to male desire, dropping her own gaze. When Rochester begins what I call the cat and mouse game, asking Jane's opinion of the beautiful Blanche Ingram, he moves to a position in which he is able
to gaze at Jane from above, asserting his worldly power by choosing to exclude her from certain essential knowledge. Rochester is shown as dominant through the use of medium close-ups from a slightly low angle, while Jane is seen from over his shoulder, in a high angle shot of her lost in the foliage. His game of words, finally, undermines Jane’s experience of their relationship; his implication that Blanche might make him a suitable wife cannot be reconciled with Jane’s vision of spiritual equality. Jane turns to go, and Rochester turns also, grabbing her elbows to hold her back. This visual image of male dominance simultaneously connotes male lack which demands fulfillment and a classic pose of female resistance yielding to the male plea: we see Jane strain away and then turn back to Rochester.  

The screenplay by Jack Pulman here retains the spirit of Brontë’s powerful language:

Do you think because I am poor and plain I have no feelings? I promise you, if God had gifted me with wealth and beauty I would make it as hard for you to leave me as it is for me to leave you. But He did
not. But my spirit can address yours, as if we both had passed through the grave and stood before Him—equal.

However, this moment of defiant female subjectivity is recuperated by the music which signals to the spectator that Jane is really just daydreaming, lost in a romantic fantasy, regardless of the radical spirituality of her words. Rochester growls, “I love you, I love you,” in an assertion of male desire and dominance, as Jane resists only to succumb in answer to his need. The final shot is a close-up of Rochester’s head on top of hers, with the stone walls of Thornfield in the background, as he says, “I will keep her, keep her,” signifying Rochester’s need to legitimize his relationship with Jane in order to establish exclusive rights over her. Neither of the films attempts to deal with the terrible ambivalence that Brontë’s Jane feels regarding marriage.

The Aftermath (1847)

Brontë portrays Jane’s struggle to maintain some sense of individuality and integrity as a difficult one, fraught with the temptation of the romantic fantasy. Rochester himself is caught up with expectations that reflect his commitment not to Jane, but to his own version of a “fairy-tale” in which he has the power to confer wealth, beauty, and status onto the object of his desire:

Every attention shall be yours, that I would accord a peer’s daughter if I were about to marry her...I will attire my Jane in satin and lace, and she shall have roses in her hair, and I will cover the head I love best with a priceless veil [261].

Brontë’s Jane strongly resists his aristocratic inclinations, refusing all but two dresses of grey and black. She insists on keeping her job as a governess with an independent salary despite Rochester’s objections and remembers with relief the possibility of her uncle John Eyre’s legacy. She sees that the possibility of her future financial independence is the only thing that might relieve the sense of being made over into the image of Rochester’s desire. However, Rochester seems confident that once he has her sexually, she will have far less resistance:

But listen—whisper—it is your time now, little tyrant, but it will be mine presently; and when once I have fairly seized you, to have and to hold, I’ll just—figuratively speaking—attach you to a chain like this (touching his watch guard) [273].

Brontë’s text, exploring the boundaries of desire in this way, foregrounds the loss of female subjectivity implicit in cultural constructs of sexuality. Jane counters her fear of becoming engulfed by emotion by fencing verbally with Rochester:

...I’ll not sink into a bathos of sentiment: and with this needle of repartee I’ll keep you from the edge of the gulph too; and moreover, maintain by its pun-gent aid that distance between you and myself most conducive to our real mutual advantage [276].

Nonetheless, Jane is tempted to lose herself in an alliance with Rochester that seems more exciting than her own solitary life:

I thought of the life that lay before me—your life, sir—an existence more expansive and stirring than my own [283].

Despite the allure of romantic love, Brontë’s Jane remains deeply ambivalent about her impending marriage to Rochester and must leave him in order to regain her sense of self. These concerns are left out of the films, which each offer an entirely different version of Jane’s engagement to Rochester. The difference between Brontë’s Jane Eyre and the Stevenson and Mann versions is most apparent in the scenes immediately following Rochester’s proposal, for reasons which reflect a cinematic concern with male rather than female subjectivity.
The Aftermath (1944)

The Stevenson version of Jane's engagement begins with a bit of highlighted text, a voiceover read by Jane/Joan Fontaine: "I loved and I was loved. Every sunlit hour I looked forward to love's fulfillment." Like much of the "authoritative" text in this film, these words are not from Brontë's novel. Brontë's Jane is a reliable narrator the reader trusts precisely because of her thoughtful detachment. The screenplay's false text drops all her doubts and fears, creating a scenario of bliss far removed from the original text. The focus on Jane's inner turmoil and ambivalence, made clear in the novel, is completely absent here. The Stevenson adaptation recreates Jane's experience for a post-war cultural order that needed women to return from war-time jobs to domestic pursuits. Ironically, the first shot in the 1944 adaptation is of Rochester's hand knocking over a stack of books. Rochester redefine Jane in the terms of romantic love; she is to be swept away from her work to join him in the illusion of escape from the reality of the everyday world:

There's a new heaven and a new earth and you go on teaching Adele as usual...I'm going to marry Mademoiselle and take Mademoiselle to the moon and find a cave in one of the white valleys and Mademoiselle will live with us there forever...

Rochester here attempts to inscribe Jane into a story of his own, in which she fulfills all of his deepest needs by isolating herself in their romantic relationship.

In Brontë's text, Rochester's illegitimate child, Adele, strongly objects to this romantic fantasy: "She will have nothing to eat: you will starve her...She is far better as she is...besides, she would get tired of living with only you in the moon. If I were mademoiselle, I would never consent to go with you" [269]. In Freudian thought, the entrance of the father disrupts the pre-verbal unity of mother and child by introducing the world of language and meaning. Accordingly, Rochester, as the maker of meaning within the diegesis of "his" story, enters the space in which Jane and Adele are situated, sweeping Jane out of the frame, leaving Adele to betray her own "original" voice to validate his usurpation: "There's no one I'd rather you marry, not even Mrs. Fairfax." Jane has no voice in this scene, nor in the following scene in which Rochester picks out fabrics for her with his pearl-handled cane. He drowns out any mumbled objections, ordering the scarlet and gold silks that are unthinkable to Brontë's Jane Eyre who refused to become a scopophilic trophy. Rochester is preparing to show Jane off to the world as his prize possession, the visible sign of his triumph.

Finally, we see Jane and Rochester in a car, surrounded by crowds of people and hear the rattling of coins. Neither Jane nor Rochester seems to mind this crassly materialistic scene. The car signifies wealth and separation from everyday people, and the final shot before the wedding is a close-up of a baggage label which says, "Mrs. Edward Rochester by steam packet to Genoa." The visual image of the trunk serves to reinforce marriage as a cultural package in which the female is given her husband's name and taken away from the familiar places of her old identity. Jane is remade from a fiercely independent woman into a passive object of Rochester's desire. In these doubly fictional scenes, completely reworked or not at all present in the novel, the spectator is encouraged—directed—to see Jane's happiness from Rochester's point of view. She is happy to be swept away, her subjectivity subsumed by his, her gaze and her voice suppressed and silent. She is happy precisely because he is happy, as we are encouraged also to be, because the continual concern of a masculinist culture with male subjectivity and authority has been satisfied.

The Aftermath (1971)

The Mann version of Jane's engagement takes place at Ferndean, deviating from Brontë's plot, giving a sense of circularity to the film. Jane and Rochester walk down the tree-lined path together, and we see them in a full long shot. These long shots which track them walking together do reflect a kind of shared space and
equality which would appeal to the feminism of the early 1970s. However, although the mutual conversations are more like the gentle repartee of the novel, the basic rules of romantic love remain the same. Rochester must take Jane away from the familiar, and she is to be his “angel”:

You won’t mind leaving Thornfield for this?...We’ll travel too...You know, many years ago I flew through Europe half mad with disgust and rage...now I’ll return with an angel as my guide.

Jane’s answer is more coy than emphatic, but at least she speaks: “I’m no angel—don’t expect it of me.” They sit at the base of a tree trunk, enjoying a peaceful and romantic afternoon. There is no ambivalence, no mingling of love and fear, of which Brontë’s Jane speaks so eloquently.

There is at least a hint of Jane’s acute powers of observation and character analysis in some lines taken from the novel. When Rochester asks, “What do you expect of me?” Jane replies:

For a while you’ll be as you are now, then you’ll turn cool and capricious and stern and I’ll have much ado to please you...And when you’re well used to me, perhaps you’ll like me once again...

These lines are part of a longer exchange in the novel in which Rochester expresses the effect Jane has on him:

I never met your likeness, Jane: you please me, and you master me—you seem to submit, and I like the sense of pliancy you impart...I am influenced—conquered; and the influence is sweeter than I can express; and the conquest I undergo has a witchery beyond any triumph I can win... [263].

Mann’s film succeeds in conveying Rochester’s attitude nonverbally; Rochester silently picks a flower and gives it to Jane. The camera dollies closer to her face, as she looks at him and then back at the flower. This scene is touching, but the film carefully avoids any attempt to deal with the question of domination and submission, power and influence, in a romantic love relationship. It is far safer and more satisfying to the non-critical spectator to watch the paradigm unfold as if it were entirely natural. The witchery Rochester feels is a result of the enchantment woven by culture over male and female sexuality in which male satisfaction is realized in female surrender. The bewitching power of the romantic fantasy only seems to offer an escape from a cultural order in which male dominance is still maintained.

Conclusion
A further explanation for the dominance of Rochester’s point of view in both films is offered by Silverman:

the viewer’s exclusion from the site of cinematic production is covered over by the inscription into the diegesis of a character from whom the film’s sounds and images seem to flow, a character equipped with authoriative vision, hearing, and speech. Insofar as the spectator identifies with this most fantastic of representations, he or she enjoys an unquestioned wholeness and assurance.

Because the concern with male subjectivity remains paramount, “the compensatory representation is coded as male.” Through the process of cinematic adaptation, Rochester is restituted close to the site of production, while Jane is trapped within the diegesis of his story. The spectator is reassured that male subjectivity remains intact and unthreatened. Brontë’s Jane Eyre succeeds in establishing her own subjectivity and articulates her awareness of the eclipse which romantic love, in service to a patriarchal paradigm, casts upon the self. Because the novel is able to use metaphor, dream, and memory to portray psychological states, the suppressed economy of female subjectivity can be portrayed through first-person narration, while still achieving verisimilitude by depicting the power and continuing presence of a male-dominant culture.
By contrast, the film versions inscribe Rochester as the initiator of action, focal point of the narrative, and bearer of point of view, without being able to sustain the presence of a competing female gaze and voice. In other words, reversing the order of the novel, we see Jane through Rochester’s eyes. The earlier Stevenson film shows the dominance of the male in the construction of romantic love. Mann’s later effort to portray Jane as a “liberated woman” only succeeds in showing her succumb to a culturally constructed fantasy.

Cinema is not only a fiction but a representation of a representation, attempting to cover the “absent real” through verisimilitude; the illusion of a reality that exists on screen is accomplished by the repression of the means of production. This is the “wound” that confronts the film spectator, who supplies a phallic signifier to fill the terrifying void. As Silverman proposes: “…film theory’s preoccupation with lack is really a preoccupation with male subjectivity, and with that in cinema which threatens constantly to undermine its stability.”

Brontë’s text establishes verisimilitude by portraying a sustaining patriarchal structure interspersed with spaces in which an uncolonized female subjectivity is expressed. The films, each in their own way, retain the patriarchal structure while filling up the gaps in Brontë’s text with Jane’s preoccupation with Rochester, closing the door on the possibility of a female subjectivity that exists independent of a man.

The female gaze remains a problematic concept: it is neither the strict opposite of the male gaze, nor the sole property of females. It echoes the Romantic concept of a self which is made larger by a transcendent experience of unity with nature. The very term “female gaze” may imply a gender-specific definition that is not my intention. Nonetheless, it does serve a useful purpose in emphasizing its difference from the male gaze, although perhaps “counter-gaze” would be a more useful term in the long run. This counter-gaze may be closely linked to the Brontëan terms, “spirit,” “soul,” and “eye”; however, these terms seem theologically weighted, and even more difficult to define. The word “eye” comes closest to capturing a larger theoretical perspective within Brontëan terminology, as well as alluding to Jane’s last name and to female subjectivity itself: “Eye, Jane.”

The exploration of a gaze which envisions a space uncolonized by the gaze of a masculinist and patriarchal culture serves the interests of both feminism and gynocritics by highlighting the potential expression of female desire. The dangerous liaisons made between film and literature continue to stimulate many answers to a theoretical debate which challenges both the film industry and its critics.

1 In Freud’s essay, “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” The Standard Edition, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), the gaze is discussed in conjunction with transformations of the sexual instincts. The power of the gaze is associated with mastery over the object that is looked at, a way of asserting difference. In gender criticism, this active gaze has been defined as the specifically male gaze.

2 Brontë, Charlotte, Jane Eyre (1847), ed. Margaret Smith (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1975) 110. All further page references to this text will appear in brackets at the end of each quotation.


5 In Freud’s essay, “Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinctions Between the Sexes,” the primal scenario of “male lack” may be extrapolated through the explanation of “castration anxiety”: the male subject experiences difference as “lack” upon the first sight of a body without a penis. Male fear of castration may be disavowed through negative projection onto the female other (as being somehow wounded or mutilated), or compensated for through fetishism where the female-as object, a body part, or a piece of clothing substitutes for the missing organ. In this way, the male subject attempts to achieve coherence by emphasizing sexual difference. The male gaze is emblematic of a psychological and cultural paradigm in which the dominant position is defined by its own fierce repression of lack.

6 Silverman 13.

7 Silverman 2.