

A Multidimensional Reading of Elite Female Imagery from a Male Director's Perspective: A Case Study of the Film *TÁR*

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ABSTRACT

In postmodern cinema, male directors offer divergent interpretations of female identity. Taking Raewyn Connell's theory of (hegemonic) masculinity, Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, and the discourse of cancel culture as theoretical touchstones, this article examines how female figures—constructed within the perspective of male directors and shaped by an internalized patriarchal logic—are formed. By unpacking these constructions, it reflects on the current impasse that hinders postmodern female representation from breaking free of the gender binary and achieving genuine awakening.

KEYWORDS

TÁR; Connell's "masculinity"; Judith Butler's "gender performativity"; "Cancel culture"

1 Introduction

Within the postmodern context, films centered on elite women are reshaping understandings of gender, identity, and power. Todd Field's *TÁR*, which he wrote and directed, adopts an unconventional narrative to portray a woman who breaks through gender barriers to become a chief conductor and join the ranks of power, only to fall from grace amid scandal. As a depiction of an elite woman through a male gaze, the film offers a model case for postmodern feminist film studies. Drawing on R. W. Connell's theory of "masculinity," Judith Butler's concept of "gender performativity," and the framework of "cancel culture," this article probes the film's representation of the distortions within contemporary social power structures and the limitations of female-centered cinema when framed by a male perspective, thereby offering new directions for engaging with postmodern feminist film.

2 Elite Female Figures under the Postmodern Male Gaze

In step with broader social currents, the way films stage the gaze has changed. In 1975, Laura Mulvey first theorized the cinematic gaze, arguing that sexual inequality splits visual pleasure between an active/male position and a passive/female one. The decisive "male gaze," she wrote, projects its fantasies onto stylized images of the female body (Mulvey, 1975/2017). Traditionally, the look travels from man to woman: the heterosexual man is the looking subject, and the woman is fixed as the object of that look—there to gratify male scopophilia. In Hong Kong cinema of the 1990s, "sexy" became the most conspicuous passport to stardom for actresses. In *Naked Killer*, for instance, the heroine is costumed in tight low-cut tops and shorts; the camera lingers in close-up on her ample chest and long legs. That glamorous image drew enormous attention at the time. As queer theory and feminism gathered force, however, the traditional gaze began to be reworked in contemporary film. With female audiences gaining cultural leverage, women on-screen are no longer merely vessels of desire; they're increasingly endowed with distinct personhood. Even male directors have departed sharply from the classic male-gaze playbook in how they shape female characters. Consider the *Legally Blonde* films. Through the arc of its protagonist, the series punctures the conventional male gaze. Early scenes filter Elle through her boyfriend's labels—"not serious enough"—and through cute, sexy shots that treat her pink styling as an object of the gaze. But by dint of her own effort, Elle reclaims and amplifies the "feminine" tag, jolting viewers' stereotypes: even a "pink Barbie" can demolish a room with argument. By contrast, *TÁR* presents a woman who has thoroughly internalized a patriarchal order. As a teacher, Tár takes aim at a student's views; as a chief conductor, she leverages her position for emotional advantage. The true subject of the gaze isn't simply the woman we see on screen, but the power-bearing figure who endorses patriarchal culture—the figure Tár comes to embody.

Even if the male gaze has shifted from what it once was, films about women made from a contemporary male vantage still show clear limits in how they shape certain female figures. Looking back at earlier cinema, scholars have noted that "female characters exist because they are projections of desire, the messages circulated within a patriarchal culture. As symbols to be exchanged, they are inscribed into stereotypes and mythic archetypes, and only through such inscription do they enter mainstream culture" (Gao Jie, 2011). In male-hero franchises such as Marvel's *Spider-Man*, women typically function as nodes in the protagonist's romantic arc or as auxiliaries in "saving the damsel" set pieces—devices that spotlight the hero's grit and devotion—while leaving little room to develop the women's own qualities. In today's social life, where patriarchy still predominates, the spread and deepening of feminist discourse have driven a surge in female-centered films, with women gradually becoming meaningful subjects of narration. As Laura Mulvey argues in her study of

visual pleasure and narrative cinema, “within a patriarchal culture, woman serves as the signifier for the male other, constrained by the symbolic order. In that order, men impose their fantasies and preconceptions upon the silent image of woman and, through the language of authority, sustain those fantasies and preconceptions. Woman remains the bearer of meaning rather than the maker of meaning” (Mulvey, 1975/2017). In *Tár*, Todd Field casts an elite woman as his narrative center and endows her with masculinized traits—an approach that accords with the stereotype that equates leadership with male identity. While it is difficult to escape male habits of thought, male-authored films about women nonetheless refract men’s views of women’s real conditions of life, as well as their fantasies about—and prescriptions for—the conduct of elite women, offering fresh angles for feminist film scholarship.

In male-led films, even when women are no longer framed purely as objects of desire, the ways they act on screen often remain deeply inflected by masculine imperatives. As Dai Jinhua notes in her discussion of women in Chinese cinema: if the disappearance of desire-oriented viewpoints and languages has succeeded in dismantling the Hollywood classical narrative’s specific patriarchal discourse—namely the “male desire/female image,” the camera grammar of “men look/women are looked at”—this does not mean the renovated classical form is non-patriarchal or anti-patriarchal. On the contrary, it is a narrative mode reorganized by a powerful patriarchal ideology (Dai, 1994). In *Tár*, Todd Field trains the narrative on the fallout from the protagonist’s *hauteur*—her entanglement in scandal—thereby sketching the hubris of a female leader and underlining that, among those who wield power, gender makes little difference: whether the figure at the top is a man or a woman, exploitation of subordinates can occur. When choosing reference images for an album cover, the camera reveals only a scatter of records on the floor; in a straight-down overhead shot, *Tár*’s bare feet step across the faces on those sleeves. The composition tells us that she not only “stands over” the music in a literal sense, but that arrogance has eaten away at her original devotion to it. She now imagines herself an arbiter of the field, licensed to judge any work. The bird’s-eye view, loaded with criticism, foreshadows her fall. Midway through the film, a near-vertical low-angle shot from the podium, paired with her sweeping arm movements, aggrandizes *Tár*’s figure—a concrete visualization of power, marking her perch at the top of the orchestra’s hierarchy. Immediately after, an overhead shot shows how she wields that power. A newly arrived young musician glimpses a scene from the balcony; through this high-angle perspective, the director captures *Tár*’s predatory, hunter-like gaze, fleshing out her abuse of authority for sexual leverage and hinting she will once again become the agent of such misuse. By contrast, in *Anatomy of a Fall*, directed by Justine Triet, the heroine never seeks to “seduce” a student, yet faces public suspicion and must plead her innocence in a language not her own. Compositions often place courtroom spectators’ backs in the foreground with the protagonist centered, heightening her powerlessness under public judgment—even forcing her to strip the veil from a broken marriage before her child. The narrative turns on the pressures bearing down on an elite woman in a household where roles are inverted into “strong wife, weak husband,” amid the crosswinds of public opinion, moral law, and family ties. From a female vantage point, Triet uses the charge against the “wife” to portray society’s suspicion of, and hostile conjecture about, “successful” women. Though the two directors diverge in their understanding of female elites, both works are bold engagements with women-centered themes. Even in the hands of male creators, feminist-themed cinema is, step by step, breaking the old shackles that cast women chiefly in a state of “to-be-looked-at-ness.”

3 Masculinity — A Ticket into Male Domains of the Political World

Despite persistent doubts about how male perspectives—especially on elite women—frame female identity, postmodern rethinking has helped break women out of the “to-be-looked-at” position typical of classical narrative cinema. In societies long steeped in patriarchy, traditional male attitudes often belittle women’s actions and feed stereotypes about female leaders’ success at work. As Tremmel and Wahl (2023) note, when “stereotypically feminine traits” are seen as mismatched with leadership traits, female leaders who display agency are judged less likable than male counterparts, receive fewer hiring opportunities, and face greater bias. From a male vantage point, the director deliberately lends *Tár* a “masculine” bearing—an indirect acknowledgement of the conventional “strong-man/weak-woman” order that still shapes much popular thinking in patriarchal societies.

From a male vantage point, the value of female leaders is often misjudged. Yet when a woman’s “masculine” traits surpass those of men in the conventional sense, she can still secure a place at the summit of a highly centralized political order. Because men typically occupy leadership roles in the workplace and in politics, that sustained dominance breeds a generalized sense of superiority and leads to underestimation of women’s leadership effectiveness. As Tremmel and Wahl’s survey shows, “under stereotyping, men consider themselves more suited to leadership than women” (Tremmel & Wahl, 2023). Even when women possess comparable leadership ability, they are easily overlooked in a secular political world. Building on this habitual undervaluation by male directors, and in order to craft an imagined figure of power, the director overlays *Tár* with “masculinity.” “Feminists around 1970 identified ‘patriarchy’ as a dominant mode in human history” (Connell, 2003, p. 89). Systemic discrimination and oppression of women function as necessary instruments of male political hegemony; thus, for an ordinary woman to achieve upward mobility in a patriarchal society, she often must exhibit a measure of “masculinity.” Here, “masculinity” does not simply denote personality or behavior typical of men,

but a person's position within gender relations—beyond biological sex—as constituted through social practice, and the ways such practice shapes bodily experience, personality, and culture (Connell, 2003, p. 97). In *TÁR*, the protagonist is an openly same-sex – married, extraordinarily accomplished conductor. Completing the recording of Mahler's Fifth Symphony is poised to launch her to the pinnacle of her career—an altitude no woman conductor has reached before. At this moment *Tár* appears almost the ideal standard-bearer for a new era, yet what she projects is a strongly "masculine" disposition: playing the "father" in her household and exerting pressure on other women within the orchestra. These traits are closely bound up with the very path by which she rose to fame as a conductor.

Imitating masculinity often functions as women's ticket into male domains. In fields where women's power is weak, those seeking authority are first expected to learn "masculine" comportment. Discussing gay and feminist theory, Connell notes that "hegemonic masculinity is closely bound up with power; men organize to rule through power relations and resist change. In short, masculinity is in fact the most naked expression of power" (Connell, 2003, p. 56). The director's emphasis on *Tár's* masculinity reflects a conventional, male-framed template for how to "legitimately" endow women with power. At the film's outset, *Tár*—already an unquestioned "authority" among conductors—acknowledges in a *New Yorker* interview that the profession is predominantly male. To reach the upper ranks of this world, she must, to a degree, package herself in "masculine" terms to "fit" the field's prevailing ethos. A conductor must also "command" the overall musical flow, which presupposes sufficient capacity and authority to manage the orchestra. The interview's staging deliberately opens up the physical distance between *Tár* and the host; their far-apart positions convey her aloofness and detachment, externalizing an inner haughtiness. From this point, the director begins to infuse *Tár's* characterization with masculine traits to set up the narrative's trajectory—while also hinting that a woman's internalization of masculinity may ultimately precipitate the collapse of her faith in power.

By wrapping an elite woman in a masculinity that cuts against her presumed feminine traits, the film heightens the character's complexity and agency. As feminist culture gains sway, screens have filled with "female-lead" stories that chart a "small figure's" rise to a "big heroine." *Hidden Figures*, for instance, celebrates real Black women's achievements in the space program to foreground female strength. *TÁR*, by contrast, makes a bolder turn in characterization: it no longer dwells on the cost of success but trains the camera on the corruption that follows power. From a male-inflected creative stance, the film opens a fresh feminist question—how do women in power differ from male power-holders in conduct and thought? At the height of *Tár's* control over the orchestra, she appears most "masculine." During the ranking and selection of players, others are filmed in lateral, side-on shots, while *Tár* alone is kept centered in her own frame with a slight low angle, signaling her commanding say over personnel decisions. Adjusting scores for personal reasons and swapping out principals further burnishes the credibility of her authority. Later, ostracized, she returns home and re-watches her idol's reflections on music: the image turns sallow and dim; in close-up she looks haggard and tear-streaked—an hour of self-scrutiny. Eventually she starts over in Southeast Asia. Through intertextual staging, the director prompts another reckoning: in a massage parlor, technicians kneel in a semicircle, echoing the orchestra's ranks, and *Tár* again seems to stand at a visual center. Only now, with power gone, the stark cash transaction makes her retch; she recognizes that her laxity toward music and her irresponsibility toward the women around her mirrored the same casual "selection." In that spatial and compositional reprise, the film lays bare the nature of power's misuse and drives the character toward remorse and reflection. Her arc—from embodying "masculinity" to recoiling from it—completes a self-audit. Such a masculine-coded female figure both exposes the stereotype that women lack leadership and invites viewers to consider how leadership and gendered traits might be held in balance; the depth of her portrayal lies precisely there.

4 Gender Performativity — A Double-Edged Sword for Feminist Progress

In a patriarchal society, when women perform certain male-coded traits, power and desire are more readily gained and satisfied. Because men largely occupy positions of authority in political and social life, advancement is typically harder for women. Displaying stereotypically "strong" or "self-interested" masculinity becomes an important condition for women to secure promotion opportunities equal to men's. Thus, women who aim for the top are often expected to mute markers of femininity and foreground a packaged, stereotyped masculine label. In a postmodern context, gender is no longer a simple binary; as politics and economics evolve, individuals' thinking about gender has shifted dramatically. Physiological sex, psychological gender, and sexual orientation have together reorganized how gender is conceived today. *TÁR* is built on a queer premise: within her same-sex marriage, *Tár* assumes the "husband" role, and her masculinity is especially pronounced. As Annette Kuhn and Anneke Smelik note in analyses of queer cinema, "homosexual images are often symbolically rendered; from a heterosexual viewpoint, gay men and lesbians fail the heteronormative standard—never 'truly' men or women. Earlier films often coded gay men as lacking masculine virility and lesbians as 'mannish,' frequently linked to violence; the stereotyped lesbian became a brutal, predatory, sadistic figure, a shameless shrew marked by castrating aggression" (Smelik, 2000/2017). *TÁR* does not fully break from such stereotyping. Within the orchestra, *Tár* exhibits a hard-edged, uncompromising, even "machista" disposition; performing "masculinity" is her habitual mode in a same-sex relationship and a tactic she uses to breach the male-dominated barriers of the conducting

world.

In political and social life, a male identity is typically endowed with greater “gravitas” than a female one. Women in power often resort to a “pseudo-masculine” persona to raise their chances of promotion and to consolidate control over subordinates. As Zhao Na (2017) argues, “cross-dressing is a gender-identity politics for claiming discursive power; it is a discourse that dissolves the binary naturalization of gender.” In the film, *Tár* is female in biological sex, yet her self-identification is saturated with “masculinity.” Prior studies note that women frequently downplay feminine traits or emulate masculine ones in appearance, work behavior, leadership style, and identity management—social “re-categorization” strategies meant to loosen the link to a female identity and thereby avoid gender discrimination (Wang Haizhen, Mei Xiaofeng, & Wei Xuhua, 2017). It is a deft script choice to link such a woman to the role of “conductor.” *Tár*’s craving for power and control mirrors the conductor’s status within an orchestra. Her embrace of a male identity grows out of managerial needs: she must project authority to command every change of tempo and timbre, and to direct personnel. From the vantage of her same-sex marriage, when she goes to the school to confront the classmate who bullied her daughter, she identifies herself as the child’s “father.” On one level, this signals the more “masculine” role she plays within a same-sex household; on another, it reveals her internal assumption that “male” carries greater authority across domains, making a masculine performance a more effective way to counter school bullying. This logic aligns with a classic feminist political move—“playing the man” to build a symbolic order that resists patriarchy (Xing Jie, 2012). Yet it departs from postmodern feminism’s emphasis on women’s distinctive strengths. A misrecognition of female subjectivity, the film suggests, is *Tár*’s inner reason for plunging into a maelstrom of public censure.

Packaging a “male” protective shell to seek power stems from a lack of women’s “self-gaze” and harbors risks that hinder feminist progress. The goal of feminism is gender equality; endlessly performing male traits in effect diminishes the female subject. As Dai Jinhua notes in her analysis of Chinese women’s cinema, “while contemporary Chinese women have been permitted to share discursive power, they have, in culture, lost both their gendered identity and the gendered character of their discourse; even as they truly participate in history, the female subject disappears behind a de-gendered (indeed, male) mask” (Dai, 1994). *Tár*’s “gender performance” in the film is muted. On the one hand, she expresses regret for women whose achievements were constrained by gender, acknowledging that gender discrimination exists—or has existed. On the other, she asks colleagues not to choose students who are too uniform in gender (i.e., too many women), thus, as a woman, failing to support equal treatment for women. Research grounded in role congruity theory argues that when women adopt social re-categorization strategies—downplaying feminine traits or imitating men—they violate gender-role norms and thereby lower others’ evaluations of their social/relational skills (their “communality”), which in turn reduces hiring chances and assessments of leadership effectiveness (Wang Haizhen et al., 2017). To advance feminism in a genuine way, women need to practice a correct “self-gaze,” uncovering their own strengths. “The real task of gender-identity subversion is to give equal standing to both ‘failed’ and ‘successful’ gender performances, and to change social reality so that re-significations of gender are no longer punished or oppressed but are acknowledged and allowed vitality” (Xie Wenjuan, 2023).

5 Power’s Backlash — Cancel Culture and the Erasure of “Pseudo-Success”

In the contemporary era, attempts by women to don a masculine guise to obtain power—and then turn that power back to repress other women—are unlikely to achieve genuine success. They can even be weaponized by those who truly hold power through the media-age vogue of “cancel culture,” forcing a stigmatizing purge of authority. “Cancel culture is a reinforced form of political correctness; it achieves its aims through a ‘powerful combination’ of public policy, social stigma, and economic consequences, and compels people in public discourse to take politically correct positions on certain issues” (Zheng Gencheng, 2023). What is most intriguing in the film is that, despite its “strong female lead” label, it uncharacteristically depicts the fall of a successful woman rather than directly denouncing the alienation of social power structures. *Tár* not only fails to use her female identity to alter the status quo of power; by performing patriarchal traits to mimic “male power” and suppress other women, she underestimates the force of modern public opinion and is ultimately caught in the pincers of an era dominated by cancel culture. “Cancel culture is a cultural practice of the new-media age. On the one hand, ordinary people—empowered by new media technologies—gain access to the means of communication; formerly passive audiences can swiftly voice judgments on behavior that violates social ethics and morality, and, through overlapping ‘circles’ of online transmission, amplify their voices and harden their value stances. On the other hand, the rise of the internet as a public sphere dissolves the discourse monopoly of traditional elites, enabling bottom-up irony, critique, and even social cancellation of elites by the public” (Zheng Gencheng, 2023). Buoyed by outsized professional success and a pride tinged with machismo, *Tár* ignores outside opinion and brushes off warnings from those around her, trusting that her achievements and abilities will carry her through the storm. Only when she is effectively “blacklisted” does she return to the original impulse that led her to conducting.

There is a dialectical relationship between a genuine feminist awakening and cancel culture. On the one hand, cancel culture can be an effective tool for some groups to defend their rights; on the other, its misguided use can heighten social

instability. Riding the rapid rise of new media, cancel culture has amplified the voices of disadvantaged groups—including feminists. “Cancel culture has made more people aware of previously unnoticed biases and discrimination; in cancellation campaigns, those who once monopolized discourse across industries now witness the power of ordinary people’s speech, which prompts greater attention to equality and has, objectively, raised the social status of minorities, women, and sexual minorities” (Zheng Gencheng, 2023). In *Tár*, the cancellation is a public protest against members of the upper echelon who slight women’s interests. “Between the conscious and the unconscious, and within the confines of patriarchal discourse, women begin to rediscover and construct their own subjective space—stepping out of constructed gender roles into a fleeting, non-real space of imagination” (Dai Jinhua, 1994). The prime mover behind the campaign against *Tár* is her assistant, long subjected to *Tár*’s abuses; *Tár*’s disrespect for women and disregard for life gradually awakens the assistant’s female subjectivity and spurs her to lead the charge. Cancel culture likewise exposes the predicaments of elite women in *Anatomy of a Fall*. A successful female writer and her fallen husband become, in the eyes of uninformed crowds, judges, and the media, the players in a melodramatic murder case. Setting aside factual evidence, the judge seeks to steer testimony toward a preferred narrative, turning the mystery of the husband’s death into a prurient probe into the wife’s private life and sexual orientation. This signals the social risks behind the vogue for cancellation. Cancel culture can foster an intolerant—even violent—atmosphere, a critique often voiced by Western elites; as *El Diario* reports, many social elites see cancel culture as devolving into a form of group-shaming exclusion that brooks no dissent (Zheng Gencheng, 2023). Unchecked, overpermissive speech may deepen class and gender antagonisms and even produce oppression of particular groups. Women do not occupy a dominant position in social life; *Anatomy of a Fall* further shows the public’s hostile suspicion and stigmatization of elite women. Only when cancel culture is properly promoted and applied can it ease social antagonisms at multiple levels and foster a true feminist awakening.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, *Tár* simultaneously maps the illusions and real predicaments confronting elite women within an alienated power system and exposes the limitations inherent in women-centered films made from a male vantage point. Feminist cinema, in the postmodern context, still has room to grow: male-authored portrayals of women may open new lines of inquiry, yet they remain constrained. The film also reflects the present social reality—patriarchy endures even as women’s power unmistakably expands. Under the long shadow of patriarchal repression, however, gender bias proves hard to eradicate, and *Tár*, by personal effort alone, cannot shift her industry’s gender hierarchy. So long as women must foreground “masculinity” to gain authority, “gender equality” remains, in effect, a patriarchal pseudo-proposition.

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