Journal of Media Literacy Education, 14(1), 153-167, 2022
https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2022-14-1-11
ISSN: 2167-8715

A more equitable film pedagogy: Including media literacy in higher education film classrooms to result in better media practitioners

Alexis Romero Walker

Manhattanville College, USA

OPEN ACCESS

Peer-reviewed article

Citation: Romero Walker, A. (2022). A more equitable film pedagogy: Including media literacy in higher education film classrooms to result in better media practitioners. *Journal of Media Literacy Education, 14*(1), 153-167. https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2022-14-1-11

Corresponding Author:
Alexis Romero Walker
alexis.walker@mville.edu

Received: June 26, 2020
Accepted: February 6, 2021
Published: May 19, 2022

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Editorial Board

ABSTRACT

This article explains the importance of including critical media literacy practices in skills-based classrooms in film education. Students continue to use methods of filmmaking that are inherently biased because they continue to be taught an age-old set of skills that do not engage in critical analysis. With the convergence of contemporary film theory in the classroom, educators can help students learn new methods of filmmaking that are representative for all communities and people. Through textual analysis of three films, this article shows why educators in higher education film programs must include critical media literacy in the skills course curriculum and how to do so. With this change in film education, we can learn to help make more equitable filmmakers.

Keywords: *critical media literacy, film education, film theory, media literacy education, media pedagogy*.

INTRODUCTION

As media literacy is gaining momentum in the media industry *and* education, I find the minimal convergence of theory and practice within film education alarming, and a step backward from putting forward pedagogies with media literacy in the curriculum within higher education film classrooms. This needs to change. For film education to be critically media literate, in terms of inclusion and diversity specifically, topics of critical thinking and theory must be discussed in conceptual *and* skills courses.

This need to combine theory and practice is not new. Feminist, critical race, and queer theorists and activists have debated concerning what should take precedence in regards to theory and practice for years (Bressler, 2011; Hartmann et al., 1996; hooks, 2013). Film theories in the last few decades – such as Dyer's (1997) concepts on lighting blackness, feminist theories on the gaze, and Green's (2013) critique of heteronormative storytelling – must be discussed in skills classrooms to help students subvert past Hollywood traditions. These more recent film theories subvert and revise classical Western film theories – such as those that are often taught in the US higher education undergraduate film theory courses – that are often discriminatory and misrepresentative (Dyer, 1997; Green, 2013; Mulvey, 1975). However, technical film classrooms often: do not discuss film theory at all while using only concepts present in Western film theory. Through the inclusion of these film theories in skills courses, we can create a new generation of practitioners who are more responsible and thoughtful filmmakers. Further, when I refer to "traditional" film skills and languages I refer specifically to film languages and skills that are generally accepted and used consistently within Hollywood classical narrative film, as it is the dominant filmic form in Western society. These methods defined by that dominant film tradition are what I critique.

The Media Literacy Education Movement

Research centered around pedagogical practices of media literacy education have developed rapidly the past few decades. Definitions of media literacy have transformed and advanced, and debates concerning what practices of media literacy should look like have intensified (Aufderheide, 1993; Hobbs, 2006; Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012; Kellner & Share, 2007; NAMLE, 2007; Zettl, 1998). Media literacy refers to a set of practices that equips individuals "to access, analyze evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms" (Hobbs, 2006, p. 16), to which *critical media literacy* adds the lens of power as expressed in stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies that are generated from and reproduced in media texts (Kellner & Share, 2007). Media literacy should invite critical thinking within media-saturated environments through direct engagement with media texts.

Development of critical media literacy is a result of some great debates within the field of media literacy education. Renee Hobbs (2006) describes the seven great debates of media literacy that ask poignant questions. Questions essential to this research are: "Should production be an essential feature of media literacy education?" (p. 20), "Should media literacy be focused on school-based k-12 educational environments?" (p. 23), and "Should media literacy be taught as a specialist subject or integrated within the context of existing subjects?" (p. 25). There is a need for a convergence of theory and praxis in film higher education skills classrooms. I propose: production should be an essential feature, media literacy education should expand into higher education, and media literacy should be integrated within the context of skills course subjects. There is additionally a need to interrogate political and ideological agendas in the medium of film and how we create it. Some of the ideological problems that exist within the film medium occur in seemingly innocuous uses where practitioners think they are technically competent, though those learned technical skills that have underlying biases are, in fact, the problem.

Media literacy has expanded to different media literacy-led movements, including critical media literacy, digital literacy, media arts, and arts education, among many. It has also been broadened to multiple fields of inquiry such as fine arts, media arts, communication studies, humanities, English, journalism, and digital media (Friesem, 2016; Hobbs, 2006; Zettl, 1998). This refers to the *umbrella concept,* where media literacy falls within a wide spectrum of philosophies, theories, and practices (Hobbs, 2006; Koltay, 2011).

Despite the rapid growth in media literacy education, scholars and educators are still working on pedagogical approaches regarding how media literacy methods work best in the classroom. Much of this research and practice takes place in the K-12 classroom (Hobbs, 2017; Schmidt, 2012). Some engagement with media literacy has continued to university classrooms, though has been limited to journalism and library studies perspectives,

focusing on "fake news" and identifying whether sources should be trusted (Farmer, 2019; Madison, 2019; Mason, 2018; Padgett, 2017). Further research shows that university classrooms prioritize a critical media literacy perspective, focusing on identifying stereotypes and modes of representation, without discussion of the production process (Kellner & Share, 2007; Scharrer, 2015). However, higher education bypasses many media literacy concepts of production that are focused on more so in K-12 (Schmidt, 2012).

There is little to no research that focuses specifically on higher-education classrooms and disciplines that have media production as their primary goal such as: film and television, interactive media studies, broadcast journalism, video game and virtual reality, and communication studies classrooms. These classrooms focus on teaching their students how to produce media; however, they do not place emphasis on critical engagement as part of the production process. I argue that through the convergence of film theory in the classroom, students who are in media production programs will begin producing content that engages more with critical media literacy practices. I make this case for film and television disciplines within this pedagogical inquiry. After using this discipline to create a pedagogical strategy, this practice can be shared across all media production disciplines to invite a critical media literacy perspective, resulting in media practitioners who will create media that is more inclusive and representative.

"TRADITIONAL" FILM LANGUAGE AND THEORIES FILM LANGUAGE

The most effective way to understand visualization language, methods, and approaches is through the medium of visuals. Visuals are powerful, and we must discover ways to be sure the visual aspect is created through equitable production practices. Early film scholars such as Epstein discussed film as a means of experiencing media through observing intimate realities. This is only one perspective of Epstein's, where not only could truth be found in the visual, but visuals could offer hints that would reveal hidden truths. Visuals can act as symbols of truth only seen through the camera, less likely to be captured by the human eye alone (Epstein, 1935). However, we know the visual is carefully constructed, not simply captured (Berger, 1972). It is a vital part of the media literacy conversation to understand how the language of the medium has created accepted, though often discriminatory, constructions (Hall, 2011).

Film theory developed shortly after the extension of the moving image to broad society, and brought with it modes of film language. Acknowledging the established language of cinema is crucial in recognizing how the language of film produces ideologies: beliefs about how power is maintained and reinforced (Berger, 1972; Brummett, 2019). These ideologies are then reproduced through media distribution. Film language refers to organizational techniques adopted and used in the cinema for years. This uses the language structure developed in semiotics, where film is dependent on codes to distribute messages (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018). These codes are simple elements of film, for example, shot composition and placement. This article focuses particularly on codes that are accepted and used in Hollywood cinema (generally influenced by Western practices), and more specifically taught in undergraduate film programs in the US. In this case, these learned practices of how to create a cinematic image are not just simple vocabulary, but define subjects with certain characteristics based on codified normalcies presented in society, which are sometimes prejudiced. These techniques often privilege certain people over others when taught, learned, and performed simplistically as "the rules of the form."

Though these implications are made by use of these techniques, left out are discussions about race, class, and gender. Often those that include critical media literacy in high education classrooms do not have these discussions until *after* content is produced, but these conversations *also* must be had *when* content is being learned and produced in technical courses. These pedagogical practices can be made real when educators first identify the traditional techniques of film language developed by reading traditional film theories that explain those canonized techniques. Then educators should read contemporary film theories where they can determine how to revise those traditional techniques to teach students how to be more inclusive in their filmmaking practices.

Traditional Film Theories

"Traditional film theories," in this case, refers to the theories that are often taught in the undergraduate level film theory classroom. As this article urges for undergraduate film skills courses to implement contemporary film theories rather than *only* accepted practices based on traditional theories, the article

focuses on the seminal works of early film theorists that are generally taught in undergraduate film classrooms. In observation of film theory courses at three universities[1], works referenced from *Film Theory and Criticism* were used consistently. Therefore, many theorists and their works were chosen from this anthology. Two theorists known for their different perspectives of the visual form of the cinema are Béla Balázs and André Bazin.

Béla Balázs, a Hungarian writer often known as the "man of silent cinema", discussed film as an opportunity to show emotion and feeling through the close-up, in his works *The Close Up* and *The Face of Man*. In his explanation of the close-up, we see how some early film prioritized the human subject to create a dramatic and emotional atmosphere.

What is more important, however, than the discovery of the physiognomy of things, was the discovery of the human face. Facial expression is the most subjective manifestation of man, more subjective even than speech, for vocabulary and grammar are subject to more or less universally valid rules and conventions, while the play of features, has already been said, is a manifestation not governed by objective canons…This most subjective and individual of human manifestations is rendered objective in the close-up. (1952, p. 200)

In this work, he argued that the human face would open a new world; a world that the human eye is incapable of seeing (Balázs, 1952). Balázs also marked emphasis on gazing at landscapes, especially in terms of its connection with mood and subject. He states,

> […] nature without man – even if it brings a wild devotion in me sometimes – does not satisfy me in itself. It is an old experience that I prefer painted landscapes with one or two figures which encompass the mood of the landscape in a way. If this is the case, I am yearning to belong to that region and to meet that person. In nature what interests me is its relation with the man. (Balázs, 1982, p. 210)

Even in Balázs' intricate descriptions of film and landscape, there is a connection he makes with human subject. This focus on the subject advances that a person should be in a shot to further satisfy the visual experience – the human subject can aid in developing the emotions of the spectator. The expressions that are captured of the subject can even be "reflected expressions of our own subconscious feeling" (Balázs, 1952, p. 199).

Differenly, André Bazin (1967), writing in post-war France, stated in *What Is Cinema* that, "[p]hotography and cinema are discoveries that satisfy over obsession with realism" (p. 12). Here he saw cinema as connected to realism. He also believed interpretations of the cinematic image should be left to the spectator. He urged that film should represent an objective reality. Bazin pushes against earlier perspectives like Baláz's, which followed traditions of formalism. Instead, Bazin thought of the cinema as a tool to observe realism captured by the camera – through methods of deep focus, wide composition, and long shots that did not go through montage (Dudley, 1976).

These early theories of cinematography and the image, though different, demonstrate two visual compositional techniques. One looked at body and form in cinema to manipulate reality, whist the other focused on cinematic techniques that demonstrated reality as is – as the objective reality. Each of these techniques have influenced ways the image is built and intended to be perceived in relation to story, emotion, and human form. These early theories are important in recognizing how film techniques today continue using the traditional methods, such as that of composition, to manipulate reality or portray perceptions of reality. Though the ideas of these film theorists are obviously more complex in the entirety of these works, these are some ideas often presented in undergraduate film theory curriculum.

Other traditional film theorists throughout the years and all over the world have expressed ideas that have identified modes of film language that are still used today. Traditional theories, ranging over a large time period from the early 1900's up to the late 1960's, ultimately influenced much of how film is still formed today. Some of these techniques used and discussed in modern skills courses include, but are not limited to: deep depth-of-field to replicate reality (Bazin, 1967), shot-reverse-shot editing known as the "Kuleshov effect" to manipulate narrative (Levaco, 1974) movement and the close-up to convey deep emotions (Epstein, 1935), and contrasting compositions in attempt to construct rather than simply show reality, and to use reality to produce art (Kracauer, 1960). Again, there is more complexity to these theories related to techniques of filmmaking throughout these decades in which film was continuing to form and develop. However, the point is that these early discussions have been canonized to a

[1] The universities referenced are based on personal observation of film theory courses at Brigham Young University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and North Carolina State University, both at the undergraduate and graduate level.

degree and lack perspectives from women and people of color (POC).

As theories continued to progress, these theorists helped conceptualize film as a unique medium with its own principles, practices, and vocabulary. These theories showcase and reinforce early film techniques. Film was made as a medium to capture, and manipulate reality or recreate reality while also constructing its own reality through developed techniques and being influenced by societal norms. It is essential for educators to understand the importance of these theories to recognize how film languages have been canonized. Then, educators can engage with the modern film theories which they can use to supplement traditional film techniques taught in skills courses.

Modern Film Theories

Contemporary film theories explain how some film language is inequitable and discriminatory toward marginalized communities. Inclusion of these theories in skills courses can subvert prejudice modes of filmmaking. Utilizing thoughts from these modern scholars within the skills classroom as to tie these ideas to the filmmaking process can help students be more equitable and inclusive filmmakers. Until conversations related to modern ideas that hope to better represent marginalized communities on screen are used in the classroom, dated techniques will persist.

Laura Mulvey, widely known for her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) shares: "However self-conscious and ironic Hollywood managed to be, it always restricted itself to a formal mise-en-scène reflecting the dominant ideological concept of the cinema" (p. 621). Mulvey focuses on the concept of "the male gaze," which argues that mainstream popular cinematography is inherently masculine. It is through the eyes of the character, camera, and audience, that the female character on screen is fetishized and sexualized through gazing at her body (p. 622). This concept emphasizes that film has a defined language – in this case to objectify and gaze at the female on screen – representing a particular group unfairly. She argues the cinema systemically engages with a negative and sexualized representation of women through the way it is filmed (Mulvey, 1975, p. 624). Though other feminist theorists may not agree with all components of Mulvey's male gaze theory, they recognize and address how film victimizes women physically and sexually through film conventions and techniques (Clover, 1992; Modleski, 1988; Williams, 1991).

Mulvey's has further updated her original theory. For example, rather than the male gaze focusing on a "male third person," she explains her intent focused on the relationship of the image of the character on screen and the spectators' "masculinized" position, which is present regardless of sex. Her focus was on built-on patterns of pleasure that come from a masculine point-of-view (POV), but she has recognized the limitations that defining this POV view as "male" has had on continuing scholarship (Mulvey, 1989). In her afterthoughts, Mulvey (1989) expands by incorporating points of, "[w]hether the female character is carried along, as it were by the scruff of the text, or whether her pleasure can be more deep-rooted and complex" as well as, "how the text and its attendant identifications are affected by a *female* character occupying the center of the narrative arena" (p. 29). An essential part of film narratives she did not fully explain in her original essay is: when a female spectator accepts the masculine POV when watching a male hero film, as "her inability to achieve stable sexual identity, is echoed by the woman spectator's masculine 'point of view'" (Mulvey, 1989, p. 30).

Still, with Mulvey's additional thoughts as well as others criticisms of her theory being focused on white (Finzsch, 2008; Kaplan, 1997) and heteronormative (Evans & Gamman, 2005) perspectives, modes of the male gaze are still used in film today. There continues to exist a fascination with the fetishization of the female body from a masculine POV within many genres. Some alternative cinema pushes against this concept, but much mainstream cinema still participates in the male gaze. When teaching students about methods of cinematography, educators can implement this theory to teach students how to *not* fetishize, and how to further investigate prescribed POVs for spectators. Educators can show students how popular Hollywood film uses technical methods to showcase women as sexualized, fetishized, and victim to violence, allowing them to critically think about how they can create media that does not do that.

Additionally, Richard Dyer (1997) has developed theory referring to lighting. In his book *White,* Dyer discusses how various skin colors reflect light differently (p. 89). He states: "Movie lighting hierarchises. It indicates who is important and who is not" (p. 102). Three-point lighting, a canonized method, doesn't function well for all skin colors. It uses three lights to best illuminate the subject of the shot: the

primary key, the secondary fill, and the back light (Dyer, 1997, p. 87). Most film students learn this lighting set up in their skills courses. However, Dyer explains that this simple way of lighting only works for light skin, while darker skin need adjustments. Using this contemporary theory in skills classrooms can help future practitioners learn to be more inclusive in their lighting set-ups to best represent POC on screen.

Lastly, screenwriting is an essential area in which contemporary film theories should be taught. Screenwriting is where story is developed and characters are created. This is where stereotypes and misrepresentations can easily arise. Michael Green (2013) discusses how radical pedagogy must be implemented in screenwriting courses. He shares,

> "I have found that educating screenwriting students in the history and cultural/political implications of representation – and critiquing their scripts with this in mind – leads to more thoughtful characterization and less rote stereotyping, as well as more originality" (p. 30-31).

He states that most screenwriting curricula doesn't include this in the coursework, and this is a failure of the curricula: "This is as important as ever, given the stereotyping, marginalization, silencing, and vilification of difference that continues unabated in cinema" (p. 31). Specifically, Green focuses on how cinema narratives around queer characters often reduce characters to their binary sex characteristics, rather than creating a narrative true to queer experience. If theories were included in the screenwriting classroom then, as Green explains, students could learn to produce better representations of queer people, allowing for more normalization.

Convergence of theory and praxis is necessary in higher education film classrooms. Through this merging, students will learn how to subvert the traditional techniques and rather make a more inclusive and representative cinema of the future. However, if students do not know they are reproducing discriminatory filmic norms, they will continue to do so. There needs to be a change in film curricula to help students become better practitioners of the future.

BUT IS THIS STILL HAPPENING? AND WHERE?

To demonstrate this need, I have done a textual analysis using contemporary theories that confront canonized film language with the scholars Mulvey, Dyer, and Green. Each section gives examples of contemporary films that still display use of inequitable film language through use of the gaze, lighting that favors white subjects, and queer stories written in a way that reproduces LGBTQ stereotypes.

Filming for White Subjects in "To All the Boys: P.S. I Still Love You" (2020)

To All the Boys: P.S. I Still Love You (2020), the sequel to *To All the Boys I Loved Before (2018),* flourishes in terms of diversity. The film features a diverse cast all-around. *Variety* said the film brought in talk of diversity and inclusion (Zagarzazu, 2018), and *Medium* called it a "cheesy diversity triumph for teen rom coms" (Essack, 2018).

The film centers on protagonist Lara Jean, a mixed Asian-American teenager who recently lost her mother and lives with her now widowed father and sister. The narrative follows Lara Jean after her sister sends out love letters to all the past boys that she loved. The first film ends with a relationship with one of the boys. This second film begins with the introduction of the classic love triangle. For the most part the film caters to diversity, in casting and how the characters are visually displayed. The film, though popular, also displays a fairly unknown cast in which conversations Dyer has included about star power (the "white glow" or the extra conscious effort of lighting POC stars equally) do not necessarily aid the analysis, or the defense of the film. In this analysis, the lighting is of particular significance. The film does well as the images shot display POC in visible lighting, and do not seclude them from their environment. However, the film falls short when using lighting to display darker skinned subjects equally to lighter skin subjects when in the same shot. Dyer (1997) discusses this on page 98:

> The practice of taking the white face as the norm, with deleterious consequences for non-white performers is evident in films which not only have stars of different colours but also apparently intend to treat them equally […]. However, it is rare that the [darker] actor is in fact lit equally.

The film does light POC well when they are the only subject in the shot, however when in the shot with a person with lighter skin, the lighting and camera adjusts for the tone of the lighter person, leaving the darker skinned person in shadows.

This happens twenty-two minutes into the film. Lara Jean and her sister Kitty sit on the couch in the living room when their father (Dr. Covey) and neighbor (Trina) walk in the front door of the house. We first see

Dr. Covey and Trina from a wide shot (Figure 1), and immediately it is difficult to see Trina's face. Dr. Covey is a white man while Trina is a woman of color, and when together in the shot, the lighting does not adjust to make her more visible. The scene moves to a medium shot (MS) of the two talking where, again, the shot makes Dr. Covey look just as he should, while Trina still looks a little dark and flat, with no dimension to her face (Figure 2).

Figure 1. *Dr. Covey & Trina enter the house*

Figure 2. *MS of Dr. Covey & Trina*

However, when he leaves, the shot switches to a MS of Trina alone, and suddenly light reflects off her face. We can now see the curves and features of her face. Warm tones bring out the undertones that illuminate her face with dimension (Figure 3). Dyer (1997) explains in some of his examples: "In separate shots they are indeed lit differently, enhancing the character and beauty of their faces to equal effect. Yet in shots featuring both of them [one] is advantaged" (p. 100). This is what occurs in this scene between Dr. Covey and Trina. One could argue that the reason that Trina is difficult to see while Dr. Covey is not is because he faces the open front door, while she faces away from the door. Additionally, with him being taller, he blocks light from hitting her face. However, when the shot moves from the MS of the two of them talking to the MS of just Trina during their conversation, the lighting changes (Figure 4). Suddenly Trina has light reflect off her face, again, with more dimension and making her easier to see. Even though the two are in the same spot, when the shot moves to feature only Trina as the subject it adjusts to her face and skin tone. The result being, in the shots with the two characters together Dr. Covey is more visible to us while Trina is harder to see. This places more importance on Dr. Covey simply because of the color of his skin.

Figure 3. *Trina MS alone*

Figure 4. *Trina with Dr. Covey in front of her as they converse*

Concerning here is that the filmmakers can light Trina's skin so she looks dynamic and visible, but when the two are in the same shot they choose to focus only on correct lighting for Dr. Covey. However, later in the film the filmmakers show they can adjust the light when a subject has a different skin tone than others in the shot. This happens seventy minutes into the film when Dr. Covey has Trina over for dinner. The table is filled with people, including his daughters, Lara Jean's boyfriend, and Trina. With most of the people at the dinner being diverse, the scenes design features orange colors, and orange lights. These colors help bring out the undertones for most people-of-color, and the scene caters to that. However, when the scene moves to a shot of Dr. Covey at the head of the table, the light is slightly changes to assist his skin tone (figure 5). Warm tones are featured behind other characters when they are the central subjects, and orange lights illuminate their faces.

Figure 5. *Dr. Covey is lit to fit the scene*

However, when the shot switches to Dr. Covey, cool colors are featured behind him and some white light is included to best make his face fit in the room that is otherwise lit for the diverse people in the scene. Dyer (1997) says that this, "is caused by the assumption of the white face as a norm" (p. 100).

This shows that filmmakers do have the ability to adjust the light for subjects with different skin tones that are in the same shots. The problem is that filmmakers have been taught that the light is only an issue when the white person in the scene does not look right. There are not, however, practices set that allow filmmakers to recognize and adjust lighting to look correct for *all* subjects. Film education teaches white balance, exposure, and color meters, and the "right" settings have always been based on the balance of light skin, or whatever is white in the room. If students are not taught how to *also* adjust lighting for darker skin, students and filmmakers will continue to adjust lighting for lighter skin tones; and so long as subjects with light and dark skin are in the same shots, darker people will be difficult to see and their facial features will be flattened.

Reinforcing the Gaze in "Yesterday" (2019)

Laura Mulvey (1975) refers to "The Gaze" as the method of filmmaking in which women are sexualized on the screen. She states: "The first [gaze], scopophillic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight" (p. 10). Although, overt sexualizing is not the only way the gaze functions. There are multiple ways that Mulvey states the gaze is present in film, such as scopophilia, narrative halt, and active male/passive female. Initially in her essay she described the gaze as male, but has since referred to is as an adopted "masculine POV," so this section works to adopt the adjusted language of the theory.

When discussing the film *Yesterday* (2019) I focus on Mulvey's explanation of what I call "narrative halt," or the gaze that stops the narrative. This is when the masculine fantasy is projected on the fetishized character – when the narrative stops and the masculine POV overwhelmingly gazes to imagine the idealized character in their fantasy. It is to "freeze the flow of action" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11). It is a moment where the masculine POV otherwise "zones out" and imagines a life where the fetishized is theirs – or so we can assume.

> The determining male gaze [masculine POV] projects its phantasy on to the female figure [fetishized character] which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist roles women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1975, p.11).

Not only does the narrative stop to gaze at the fetishized subject on screen, but the aesthetic choices surrounded by the subject also contribute to the gaze, highlighting the character's beauty and ability to-be-looked-at. Combined with Dyer's (1997) concept of the "angelic glowing white woman," *Yesterday* demonstrates tropes of the gaze in how the character Ellie is portrayed.

Yesterday (2019) is a film about Jack, a struggling musician, who is one of the few people that "remembers" *The Beatles* after waking up in an alternative timeline where *The Beatles* never existed. After realizing he is one of the only people that remembers the band, he begins recording the songs himself and gets famous. That is until he decides to admit that the songs are not his and goes back to a simple life. A sub-story involves the romantic difficulties between Jack and Ellie. I chose this modern-day film because it is a story that includes romance, but is not a romantic comedy – its central story is something other than the romantic relationship. However, whenever the story wants to indicate romance or romantic feelings, it does so by gazing at Ellie. This shows that the gaze has become a part of film language that is used without second thought – this is why it may be harmful. The gaze has been accepted to indicate romance between two characters, and does so through halting the narrative to take a masculine POV and fantasizing the Ellie.

The first time the audience is cued to gaze at Ellie is thirteen minutes into the film. This is when Jack first sings *Yesterday* and everyone is drawn in by the beauty of the song. As Jack sings, the camera goes to Ellie watching him. Soft light reflects off her face to give her a subtle glow, and light gently reflects off the hair at the front of her head (Figure 6).

Figure 6. *Ellie listens to Jack sing "Yesterday"*

Although Jack sings the song, it is Ellie that the camera gazes at, assuming a masculine POV for the audience. There are other characters' present, but when another subject is shown watching Jack play, the camera quickly moves back to Ellie to stop and gaze at her again. In this example, the camera chooses to focus on Ellie as a beautiful white woman, indicating she is visually beautiful to look at, and will be the character who will be most victim to the masculine POV. The camera stays with her in this part of the narrative, rather than focusing on Jack, who is actually doing the big reveal of the film, which is singing the *Beatles* song that none of the other characters know but him.

This continues with Ellie more overtly throughout the rest of the narrative. Jack later begins to have feelings for Ellie, and rather than just the camera and audience fetishizing Ellie, Jack's character gazes also. This happens fifty-nine minutes into the film when Jack returns to London and goes to dinner with Ellie (Figure 7). It happens again when the two go to his hotel room and are about to be intimate (Figure 8).

Figure 7. *Jack gazes at Ellie during dinner*

Figure 8. *Jack gazes at Ellie in his hotel room*

These are related overtly to romance; however, it is problematic that the only way to demonstrate a romantic cue is through fetishizing the subject. This cue has been adapted and reused in film language without second thought – it has been accepted as a narrative beat, or a method of the romantic genre.

It also participates largely in Mulvey's description of the gaze in its original position as well as its revisited position in that the character that is fetishized also finds pleasure in her being sexualized. She has, herself, envisioned a relationship with the main character in the film and finds pleasure and excitement when he gazes at her. She enjoys the scopophilia from the male character, and invites the masculine POV from spectators, regardless of their sex.

Additionally, this concept paired with Dyer's white woman lighting is used to a higher degree later in the film as the romance between Jack and Ellie progresses. One hour and twenty-eight minutes into the film Ellie walks into the room where Jack sits, as he is defeated. The camera follows her as she walks in through the door behind Jack, where she stops in bright white light that illuminates her face. It almost acts as a spotlight that she stops inside of, so we can gaze at her face for just a moment (Figure 9).

Figure 9. *Ellie in light*

Figure 10. *Ellie walks in on their wedding day*

Then she bends down, kisses Jack, steps back into the light, uses a "shush" motion, and quietly walks to the door and is gone. Given her sudden disappearance, this indeed could be a fantasy – an event that Jack just imagined to try and make himself feel better. And in that fantasy her white face glows – we stare at her as beautiful as can be. The gazing glow continues throughout the film, such as when Ellie walks in on their wedding day (Figure 10), and at the end of the film after they are married. Ellie's entire character is defined by how she is visibly seen in the film; how she is defined by the way that Jack, the camera, and the audience stops in the middle of the story to participate in scopophilia – to gaze at what Jack essentially wishes to be his, and what the audience hopes he will receive. And with that,

Jack is rewarded in the end. He is rewarded not with fame or wealth, but with Ellie.

This film language attributed to genres of romance (not just melodrama) and cues of romance is problematic. It normalizes the idea of a masculine POV that objectifies characters when connected to romantic feelings. Because this has become an accepted method of narrative filmmaking, the gaze continues to be used in film, even if it means that it works against the rest of the narrative. Rather than reinforcing this POV in filmmaking, educators teaching skills courses related to cinematography can teach students how to avoid using the masculine gaze when indicating romance. Instead, instructors and students can work together to find alternative ways to indicate intimacy other than through objectification.

Reproducing Stereotypes in Queer Stories in "Blue Is the Warmest Color" (2013)

Finally, it is also essential to include critical media literacy discussions in reference to diversity and inclusion within the screenwriting process. In regards to dominant forms of Hollywood classical narrative film, screenwriting has been taught to follow a simple timeline of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Screenwriting courses also discuss the use of the hero's journey and action, problem, action narratives, and essentially copy the basic narrative structure of other successful movies (Green, 2013). However, something that often remains left out is how many of these screenwriting methods focus on heterosexual character experiences. Green (2013) explains that there is a need to include critical cultural conversations in screenwriting classrooms so that students can learn to expand their storytelling practices beyond heterosexual experiences and include the queer experience without using stereotypes. However, "Unfortunately, screenwriting curricula typically do not mandate that cultural studies and representation be taught within them" (Green, 2013, p. 30).

If educators include the Green's contemporary theory and queer theory in curricula, it can help students create narratives that are representative of the queer experience. Rather, stories that stereotype or limit the queer experience are the stories produced in mainstream film. Queer films typically showcase the trauma of being queer, or oversexualize the experience of queerness, placing queer subjects as victims or extremely sexual beings. Green (2013) explains,

> Even despite the recent popular success of such queer-themed films as *Milk* (2008), *A Single Man* (2009), and *The Kids Are Alright* (2010), Hollywood mostly persists in its traditional representations of queers, who are vilified, stereotyped, marginalized, or absent altogether […] few queer-themed films are made where queer sexuality is not the subject of the movie" (p. 32)

This view of queer lives limits how queer stories can thrive, and keeps the queer experience constrained to what heterosexuals believe being queer means – that is having characteristics of being exceedingly sexual, or living a life where being queer means being persecuted.

An example of a queer film that demonstrates these narrative mishaps that occur with a narrow view of the queer experience is *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (2013). This film was critically acclaimed, winning the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival (IMDB), however the director has since been criticized for his fascination with sexual content. The *New York Times* discussed the film as a sexual coming of age story that focuses on the protagonist's appetites, with fragmented images and a narrative that sees the protagonist's body as a "puzzle that needs solving" (Dargis, 2013). Rather than engaging with queer experiences outside of sexuality, the film falls into the trap of heterosexual perceptions of queerness by focusing in on identity crisis and a lot of sex.

The film features Adèle, beginning with her in high school and continuing with her as she becomes an adult. She meets a woman named Emma and falls in love with her. Falling for Emma begins her journey of confronting her sexuality and her continuous hunger for sexual pleasure. The narrative is a coming-of-age LGBTQ story as she finds that she is attracted to a woman and does not know how to stop thinking about it. She has sexual dreams of being with Emma before they meet. She masturbates while thinking of Emma. And she kisses another girl after being told that she is pretty. Following rejection from her girl friend from school, she goes to a gay bar with her gay male friend. There she meets Emma in person and they begin to hang out after that. When Adèle's friends from school hear that she was at a gay bar they harass her, yelling at her that she will "never eat my pussy" and that she needs to admit that she is gay. After this incident Adèle abandons those friendships and pursues her relationship with Emma, but never admits to anyone else that she is in love with a woman. This is not anything new – it is the queer narrative that is told over and over again. A girl or boy begins to recognize their attraction to someone of the same sex, they begin to think of that person sexually,

and then other people notice and exploit the person for being gay. It is both a predictable story, and only focuses a narrow part of a queer person's life – when they are sexual and when they are being outed.

Additionally, the film participates in the extreme over-saturation of sexual content and sexual appetite. Once Adèle discovers that she is attracted to Emma and enjoys having sex with her, it seems that she cannot stop. She first masturbates when thinking of Emma eighteen minutes into the film. After meeting Emma in person and beginning to hang out with her, an hour and fifteen minutes into the film is when they first have sex. This scene goes on for more than five minutes, with wide shots to see the subjects' bodies, as well as fragmented shots of their faces as they are pleasured and of their buttocks as they are slapped. Fifteen minutes later, the two engage in another sex scene. Eight minutes after that they have sex again. Then, when the two are not having sex but are having dinner with other LGBTQ friends, the conversation still centers around sex (particularly the female orgasm). Then, when Adèle and Emma presumably are farther along in their relationship, Adèle is unable to hold herself back when they are not constantly having sex, resulting in her having sex with a man. When Emma asks her why she cheated on her, Adèle says that she "felt so alone," implying that sex is the only thing that can fill her loneliness. This presents Adèle as obsessed with sex, and implies that this over obsession is just a natural part of the queer experience.

Two hours and thirty-eight minutes into the film Adèle and Emma meet at a coffee shop after having not seen each other for years. At the coffee shop Adèle tells Emma that she missed her, and that she misses touching her. She then starts licking Emma's hand, kisses her, and forces Emma's hand to touch her vagina. They kiss intensely and Emma continues to touch Adèle until Emma eventually tells Adèle to stop. Adèle says to Emma, "It's beyond my control." This reinforces a dangerous stereotype that queer people cannot control themselves when they are attracted to someone; that something comes over them in which they cannot stop themselves from sexually attacking the person that they want to be intimate with. Green (2013) states: "The issue of genre highlights yet another problematic issue surrounding queer cinema, which is that even indie queer films tend to focus on sexuality as a subject" (p. 33). In this case, Adèle is less of a character than her sexuality. This scene implies that her sexuality takes over and she has no control. It implies that her sexuality is somehow more than her. Rather than being a story about the queer experience, it is a narrative about uncontrollable sexuality[2] as a part of queerness.

Stories that represent the fullness of the queer experience need to be made rather than only stories that discuss the distress of coming out, or continue to hypersexualize queer subjects. By including critical cultural theories, queer theories, and film theories in screenwriting classrooms, students can have a better understanding of what queerness means, which can allow them to escape predictable, heterosexual perspectives of queer narratives that continue to be reproduced in film. Green explains: "Student screenwriters should be aware that the next step for queer characters to begin to fill these roles as well and not just be confined to melodramas, erotica, romantic comedies, or social problem films" (p. 33). Educators can additionally use some of Green's suggestions, such as analyzing case studies with students and providing exercises that allow students to practice different approaches to representation, to create media literate practitioners that have diversity in mind when they write stories.

CONCLUSION

As educators, it is vital that we begin teaching media production courses that are representative and inclusive to all. This will help students become more critically media literate media practitioners. Additionally, this will provide an environment that invites diversity and inclusion in the classroom. Not only will this convergence of contemporary film theory that focuses on techniques of diverse filmmaking help educate students to be better media makers, but it will also communicate to minority students that they matter, and their perspective is important to storytelling practices. It shows that we find importance in minority students being positively represented, and are making sure that happens through the way that we educate our students.

To accomplish this, we as educators need to place emphasis in including conceptual topics and theories into the film skills classroom. The convergence of these theories, which I present as contemporary film theories pertaining to cinematography, gaffing and

[2] It is important to note that I am not saying that presenting sex and talking about sexuality is bad – when talking about both heterosexual and queer identities, sexuality is a part of the conversation. However, it becomes problematic when it is the only feature of a character that represents the experience of a community.

screenwriting, with the production of media can help students apply vital techniques to subvert dominant Western, classic Hollywood film language as they create their own media. Explaining the canonized film language and then showing students through exercises how to subvert that canonized language when it is inequitable is extremely important in creating reflexive and conscious media makers. In assigning these film theories that work to make media making more inclusive to minority communities as reading assignments, and then applying those theories through activities in the classroom, students directly engage with media making methods and techniques that work to represent all subjects and communities in filmmaking equally. As seen through my examples above of *To All the Boys: P.S. I Still Love You* (2020), *Yesterday* (2019), and *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (2013), there is still a need for film students to learn how to be more inclusive in their filmmaking skills and practices.

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