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**Beefing Up the Beefcake:
Male Objectification, Boy Bands, and the Socialized Female Gaze**

By
Dorie Bailey

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

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“I enjoy gawking and admiring the architecture of the male form. Sue me. Women have spent centuries living in atmospheres in which female sexual desire was repressed, denied or self-suppressed, and the time has come to salivate over rippled abdominals, pulsing pecs and veiny forearms. Let's do it. Let's enjoy it while it lasts.”

--*Dodai Stewart, “Hollywood Men: It's No Longer About Your Acting, It's About Your Abs”*

December 11th, 2015

Abstract:

In the traditionally patriarchal Hollywood industry, the heterosexual man's "male gaze," as coined by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, is the dominant viewing model for cinematic audiences, leaving little room for a negotiated reading of how visual images are created, presented, and internalized by male and female audiences alike. However, as Hollywood's shifting feminist landscape becomes increasingly prevalent in the mainstream media, content incorporating the oppositional "female gaze" have become the new norm in both the film and television mediums. Through an extended analysis of the gaze as socialized through gendered learning in children, the "safe space" afforded through the formulaic platform of "boy bands," and the function of romantic comedies and the emerging feminist rhetoric prevalent in such films as "Magic Mike: XXL," the conceptual "female gaze" is defined and explored through the demographic of young girls as they grow and push their understanding of desire, particularly as they develop into the mature, media-consuming women that have become increasingly vocal in the Hollywood sphere.

Keywords: Male gaze, Female gaze, Laura Mulvey, Feminism, Magic Mike: XXL, Boy Bands, Rom-Coms, Adolescent female

The age of the female revolution is upon us. Hollywood's growing female voice—both on and off screen—has contributed to the recent surge of female-positive films, television shows, and online material, all thanks to the changing feminist landscape of the mainstream media and cultural climate. The increased inclusivity and broader range of “normalized” content included in film, television, and pop culture that accompanies this shifting media environment allows for the desires and demands of the women of today—from the female audiences to the creative minds behind the scenes—to be heard, celebrated, and respected as they never have before. Women are finally being acknowledged as the powerful patrons and consumers they truly are, and the resulting change in the entertainment industry only proves how integral this traditionally overlooked group is in the creation of diverse, refreshing, and important content that challenges the conventional and hegemonic patriarchal power structure so deeply engrained within the Hollywood system.

As one would expect, some prominent themes have emerged as a result of this movement, offering a new “norm” for filmmakers and audiences alike to incorporate into their media-consuming practices: embracing the “female gaze,” and celebrating women and their sexuality. In a world of BuzzFeed quizzes titled, “Can You Guess The Britney Spears Music Video From The Hot Guy?” and EliteDaily slideshows depicting “14 Photos of Hot Guys Who Have Ridiculously Perfect Butts,” it's clear that objectifying men and their bodies, much like females have been for centuries past, is the latest trend that has accompanied the growing popularity of feminism in the mainstream cultural and

social spheres.¹ This shifting feminist media climate Hollywood is slowly succumbing to is the reason that objectifying the male body has indeed become the new favorite pastime women (and men) everywhere, and is one of the main contributing factors that allowed the no-nonsense, beefcake-laden film “Magic Mike” (2012) to be made in the first place—and then given an even hunkier, female-positive sequel.

So why is it that the “female gaze”—generally speaking, how women see and deconstruct the media, as well as how the content that is created for them handles this particular perspective—has become synonymous with male objectification and a generation of girls and young women who are not afraid to voice their opinions about what they want? Where and when were the seeds of this kind of voyeuristic, equalizing behavior planted in these girls’ minds? One of the hallmark identifiers of this female generation is of their youth belonging to the late 1990’s-2000’s years, as the digital and technological revolution changed childhoods everywhere and shifted how young people would begin to interact with not only each other, but with others online. These girls were also the prime demographic for one of the biggest pop-music revolutions in musical history, uniting them as lovesick, dedicated fans (often deemed “insane” by social and cultural outlets, touching upon the fact that exclusively female interests are almost always critically relegated as being “lesser” than those that appeal mostly to men) that even today still have nostalgic attachment to the objects of their pre-pubescent affection: the dreamy and totally hunky members of the boy bands that ruled the 90’s and 00’s.

¹ These are both real quizzes that were meticulously plucked from a quick Google search of “hot guys butts,” and can be found here: <http://www.buzzfeed.com/danmegarry/can-you-guess-these-britney-spears-videos-by-their-11vpx#.duZOw9v2l> & <http://elitedaily.com/envision/guys-with-nice-butts-photos/1103164/> (respectively).

It is this platform, that of the boy band, that instills within young girls the first inklings of male objection for both pleasure and sport. This early exposure to and encouragement of such fantastical adoration is what has shaped the female gaze of today's teenagers and young women, contributing to not only the demand for more equally objectifiable content in the increasingly feminist Hollywood climate of today, but also helps explain the success of such content with female audiences. For example, "Magic Mike: XXL," the man-candy filled, ultra-feminist sequel to the original visual pandering to this powerful new collection of moviegoers, was received by a 96% female audience on opening weekend—a staggering statistic that only proves how starved women are for content that unapologetically explores what women (albeit the predominantly-heterosexual female audience that Hollywood is most comfortable with) want to see.² This is why, through an extended analysis of boy bands, the adolescent female fantasy, and the surprisingly female-positive and nostalgic undertones peppered throughout "Magic Mike: XXL," the effects of these influences on the gaze of the modern female spectator can be best explored, showing how they have developed and revolutionized Hollywood's treatment of female audiences, feminist content and topics, and male bodies like never before.

The Male Gaze: Patriarchal Power at Play

To discuss the gaze, male or female, without invoking Laura Mulvey would be considered media theory blasphemy. Mulvey's landmark 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," not only coined the term "male gaze," but also encouraged the

² The statistic, and its noteworthy connotations, is discussed here: <http://screenrant.com/magic-mike-xxl-96-percent-female-audience/>

examination of the relationship between the spectator, the subject, and the audience, particularly those enforced by a patriarchal power structure. The “male gaze,” as described by Mulvey, is the default depiction of women and the world around them in visual culture, as defined through the male perspective. The “gaze” in question refers to the three perspectives necessary in constructing cinema and visual culture, revealing how these views contribute to the gender imbalances and power dynamic inherently built within the texts themselves: that of the characters’ within the text, that of the camera, and the voyeuristic gaze of the spectator consuming the text.

For male audiences, this vantage point is inherently patriarchal in nature, and thus allows for an ease of identification without much negotiation of objectivity. As a result of this masculine perspective of the woman, however, her own view is relegated to the “passive” gaze, inferior to that of the man. Thus, the patriarchal dominance of women in visual culture is continued, and this asymmetrical power structure is embedded within the construction, narrative, and preferred reading of the text in question. The audience, male and female, identifies with the heterosexual male gaze of the perspective on screen, and the female form is presented as existing for the male viewing pleasure. Therefore, the active role of “the looker” is systematically adopted by the male, where as the passive role of “the looked at” is therefore assumed by the female, removing agency and identity through the scopophilic nature of the look.

The Female Gaze: Ladies Who Look

With this definition of the “male gaze” in mind, classifying the “female gaze” as its own concept becomes problematic, as the only point of comparison lies in the

patriarchal counterpoint that the female gaze is trying to counteract. The inherent nature of the male-dominated Hollywood system makes an independent construction of the “female gaze” highly improbable, because the patriarchal ideologies that are still integral to the industry—many decades after Mulvey’s essay was first published—are difficult to completely dismantle, even if the content creators all operate with the female perspective in mind. Despite the fact that many milestones have actually been made in terms of pushing for wider diversity and representation within the industry, the persistent gender disparities that still remain further highlight precisely how deeply the dominant male discourse runs throughout media culture.

An examination of some of the films from 2014, with special attention paid to the role of women on and off screen, can help contextualize how drastic the gender gap in Hollywood really is. In a study of the top 700 films of 2014, only 20% of those working in key behind-the-scenes roles were women: 21% were executive producers, 18% were editors, 13% were writers, another 13% were directors, and only 9% were cinematographers.³ Of the top 100 grossing films released in 2014, only 12% of the protagonists were female, with women acting as 29% of the major characters and 30% of all speaking characters. Interestingly enough, movies with a female director employed “substantially higher” numbers of women in other behind-the-scenes roles than movies with a male director—however, in the top 250 movies of 2014, the percentage of women working in the same roles as listed above (director, producer, writer, etc.), totaling 17%, is the same percentage of women in those same roles from the year 1998: the same year that the study was originally published.

³ These statistics are from a study conducted by the Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film, found here: <http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/research.html>

Clearly, Hollywood has a problem with women—or at least, a problem with letting them do the work that men have traditionally been doing since the business of Hollywood truly kicked off. And yet, Hollywood seems to have no problem with the fact that female audiences are the majority of all moviegoers and ticket buyers.⁴ The obvious gender gap present behind the silver screens of Hollywood further proves why the “female gaze” cannot be defined simply as the female equivalent of the “male gaze:” the male ideology and hierarchal structure that Hollywood is built on offers a completely different kind of ownership and agency for females creators and audiences alike, and the masculine power dynamics intrinsic to the “male gaze” simply do not exist in the same way for the “female gaze.”

Roots Vs. Wings: The Socialization of Gender Roles

If how the gaze is constructed through the manufacturing of the image cannot explain the female gaze, then there must be another underlying framework that can make clearer what it really is. Perhaps taking a closer look at another aspect of the gaze—the audience’s identification with and interpretation of the look—can help elucidate the more essential aspects of the “female gaze” at its core. The audience are the ones internalizing the gaze as presented in the visual image, and thus how this perspective manifests itself as filtered by their experiences, ideologies, preferences, and learned expectations can provide the most information about the gaze itself. To examine this further, consider the beginnings of how audiences learn to interpret what they see, in addition to how they perceive the world around them.

⁴ From the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA)’s 2014 Theatrical Statistics Summary, found here: <http://www.mpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/MPAA-Theatrical-Market-Statistics-2014.pdf>

In a segment of the documentary “Sex and Gender,” originally aired in 2001, Stanford psychologist Phillip Zimbardo explores how socially-learned gender differences in young children affect their development throughout later stages of their life, and also examines the effects of these gendered differences as pushed on children starting as early as 24 hours after they are born.⁵ Zimbardo states that, although there are some biological reasons for these differences (sex hormones, physical ability, etc.), the main ways in which men and women differ in adulthood stems directly from the social expectations and gendered standards of conformity that encompass a child’s infancy and adolescence.

While a lot of the wording of this documentary segment in itself is problematic (it actually reinforces some of the gendered stereotypes that it is trying to highlight in the first place, such as sympathizing with the difficulties faced by young boys who are not allowed to cry or show emotion, but claiming that girls can use crying “to their advantage, to get their way with other people”), the points made about the different ways in which boys are taught to “grow wings” and girls are taught to “grow roots” is particularly relevant to discourse concerning the gaze for both males and females. “Growing wings” entails the inherent freedom associated with maleness, where young boys are encouraged to explore, adventure, make mistakes and learn from them without fear of repercussions, and, to put it bluntly, grab life by the horns.

The exact opposite is true for girls, who are encouraged to “grow roots.” Young girls are instead taught to be safe and avoid any rough activities or danger in order to

⁵ This is a segment called “Sex and Gender” from the telecourse called “Discovering Psychology,” taught by Philip G. Zimbardo, that aired in 2001. A link to the video segment can be found here:

<http://www.learner.org/series/discoveringpsychology/17/e17expand.html>

protect themselves. Traditionally feminine characteristics—for example, being more emotionally expressive, preening the “motherly” instinct by taking care of those around her, and developing close friendships with other girls—as prescribed by societal gender roles heavily influence their adolescent lives, and subconsciously become part of the child’s understanding of her position within the world and those around her. Zimbardo explicitly highlights the differences between girls and boys, boiling down the perceived gender role of males and females (specifically within the United States, though these expectations are likely also seen on a more global scale): “The feminine role in the United States is gentle, emotional, dependent. The masculine role is aggressive, independent, dominant” (3). This polarity between the two roles manifests itself in the male and the female gaze, respectively; on the one hand, the male gaze is far more about the spectatorship of the image than the implications of the image, especially seen through the positioning of the female body as the object, frequently seen in sexual or promiscuous poses and clothing, and further pushing the power relations strongly encoded within the idea of the male gaze.

The female gaze, however, is less about explicitly “looking” at the subject, and instead relies heavily on the connotations and contextual clues coded in the image—such as emotion, narrative, and character identification—in additional to appealing visuals that reflect a pleasure in looking at the male form with these clues in mind. One contradiction that arises from these socialized gender differences is that even from a very early age, girls are taught to be non-sexual beings, with negative connotations such as “slut,” “easy,” or “impure” being attributed to female sexuality. Yet, through the male gaze, the female body becomes a sexual object that girls are subjected to, therefore providing them with an

impossible standard to live by—thus producing the need for this kind of female gaze, where sexual and emotional desires can be explored on a fantasy level without actually acting on them in real-life circumstances.

Marcy Cook, a feminist blogger, connects these discrepancies between the male and female gaze to the reductionist nature of the male perspective towards the female body: “Women use the female gaze in a different way than the male gaze is used, as men are not reduced to their body parts and stripped of all other attributes. When a man is viewed through the female gaze you’ll find the focus isn’t just on their junk or abs, it will also show that he’s intimate, dorky, talented, funny or friendly. Men remain multifaceted and retain more than just their looks” (Cook, 2015). This “multifaceted” appeal that separates the gendered gaze reflects back on the “wings vs. roots” argument stemming from the socialized gender roles in young children—as Zimbardo states, the female role is “emotional” and “dependent,” perfectly framing the importance of incorporating aspects of the male characterization and image that extend beyond the physical and superficial representation in visual culture.

This contrasts sharply with the “wings” model of gendered socialization for boys: the entitlement and inherently “dominant” power dynamics that boys are taught leave no room for an examination of appeal beyond the surface, because boys are conditioned and encouraged to do what they please. In this sense, such lessons eliminate any kind of introspective examinations that accompany strict gendered learning—the same ones that are pushed on young girls with every limitation and restriction placed on the kinds of societal and culturally accepted roles they can play. Young boys learn that they will be accepted and praised for their aggressive behavior, and are scolded for being too sensitive,

or acting too “girly.” Being overly emotional and crying are considered signs of weakness, which only works to further reinforce the separation of sentimentality and the female body, and instead plays into the destructive nature of hypermasculinity—especially as imbedded within boys at such a young age.

Safe Spaces and the Sexy Hunks That Will Wait

Continuing the notion that young girls “grow roots” and learn to condition their behavior, interest, and actions in order to fit societal expectations and fully develop their own understanding of desire, sexually and emotionally, they must practice and test out these feelings in a “safe space.” Enter: the teen idol sensations that provide such an exploratory space for these exact feelings, especially as discussed by Bridie Connellan in her essay, “Consuming Man Candy.” Expanding upon the adolescent appeal of the manufactured “teen idol,” Connellan explores the non-threatening space where young girls can explore their sexuality and desires that these boy band idols provide, as well as the purposeful marketing of these idols in such a way to the targeted audience of impressionable, developing young girls. “Boy-watching” has become engrained within the culture of young girls, and the media created with their gaze in mind further promotes this objectification of males and teen boys as a social pastime. The unthreatening nature of looking at these highly constructed and manipulated caricatures of attractive, ideal males for pleasure allows the girls to grow into the hormonal and emotional changes accompanying their growing up—without the real-life implications and potential consequences of actually exploring and acting upon these feelings with real-life boys.

Connellan also examines the model of the “sensitive, non-pressuring” teen idol, referencing both the “High School Musical” and “Twilight” presentations of the leading men as more emotionally driven versus sexually motivated. In the case of both of these characters (Zac Efron as Troy Bolton, and Robert Pattinson as Edward Cullen, respectively), their relationships with the leading females are characterized as being more wholesome, placing an emphasis on the sentimental rather than the physical connection between the two: After previously-foiled attempts in the first and second movies, Troy finally kisses his girlfriend in the third installment of the “High School Musical” franchise—whereas Edward refuses to have sex with his leading lady (despite her increasingly irritated requests to do so as the book series continue) until the fourth book of the franchise, which, notably, takes place after they are married, though he is still somewhat begrudging about it.

The feminist film author Cleolinda Jones explains why this model of a reluctantly-sexual male idol is so effective: “...this is why you see a lot of girls feeling drawn to the Edward Cullen character...because this is someone who is willing to take it slowly. In fact, you can push him as much as you want...and he's still not going to give in.” She also addresses the dominant position of the young, female audience, positing, “It's liberating for the shy or inexperienced (right up until the point it becomes frustrating as all hell): Edward's the training wheels on your bike” (Jones, 2008). It is this pressure-free, slow-paced move from solidifying the sensitive and emotionally driven aspects of a relationship to acting on them physically and, at least, in the case of Edward, quite passionately that is so appealing to younger girls—the double standard of being sexualized from such a young age, yet socially prohibited from acting in a similar way for

fear of public scrutiny or shame, does not leave much room for exploring these various feelings about boys, sex, and desire without succumbing to how sexuality and romance is portrayed quite frequently in the mainstream media.

Sparkly vampires and glorified high school basketball stars are not the only ways in which the characterizations of these more “innocent” models of affection are manifested. The conceptual male teen heartthrob dominates the various pop cultural spheres that young girls are flocking to, and incorporates the “cute, yet caring” model of presentation into not only the mediums of both cinema and television, but also the highly lucrative and massively popular musical genre that caters primarily to female listeners: pop music. It is these attractive, ideal, vocally talented males that took these captivated audiences by storm and changed the face of pop music forever—as well as provided the necessary space that these young girls needed to grow as women.

Bubble Gum Pop and Beautiful Boys: The Beginning of an Era

Starting in the mid-1990s, America was introduced to a new era in pop music noted for its coiffed hair, charming good looks, and upbeat musical style: the boy band. Defined as “a formulaically organized pop music group of good looking young men who can sing and dance,” this genre was no stranger to American audiences.⁶ Though the 1960s and 1970s saw the beginning of this musical phenomenon, with bands such as The Beatles, The Monkees and Jackson 5, the trend became increasingly popular as the decades progressed, with the emergence of New Kids On The Block (NKOTB) in the 1980s bringing the popularity of the genre to a swell. The creation of both the Backstreet

⁶ As defined by Dictionary.com's 21st Century Lexicon.

Boys (BSB) and NSYNC in the mid-90s, however, propelled this highly distinctive musical style to record heights previously unseen.

Fast-forward to 2012—after a significant lack of boy band activity for almost a decade—and it seemed their reign was back and stronger than ever. The current champions of the boy band niche in America, British import One Direction, not only meet the tacit qualifications expected of their act, as defined above, but also reflect a shifting cultural movement that has once again redefined what it means to be “a boy band.” The days of matching outfits and synchronized dance moves are no more, and the modern boy band of today maintains the appeal, charm, and formulaic prowess necessary in achieving astronomical levels of success in a variety of new ways—they frequently send Tweets and post pictures on Instagram, utilizing the social media outlets that, should they have been around during their predecessors time, would likely have allowed both the BSB and NSYNC to achieve even greater feats at that time.

But, Why Boy Bands?

As Mulvey is to the study of the gaze in cinema, so are The Beatles to the creation and success of a musical genre that has consistently and successfully been overwhelming consumed by female audiences. In "She Loves You: The Beatles and Female Fanaticism," detailing the various appeals of The Beatles to a young and revolution-ready female audience—an emerging niche of empowered and restless women, ignited by the Rock N' Roll music of the 1960's—Kimberly Cura explores how The Beatles shook up the music scene, and provided a new medium for girls to express their desires, both sexual and emotional. The sensitive, caring, and female-friendly ideas and lyrics that

were wildly different from the other kinds of Rock music popular at the time projected The Beatles music and their brand to astronomical levels of success. Their branded image, promoting a “moderated type of masculinity” and even bordering on androgyny, contributed to the “deviation from a traditional hyper-masculine image [that] enabled the Beatles to appear attractively vulnerable” (105). In addition to their visual presentation, the group dynamic of a collective band, rather than one lead singer with back-up musicians, furthered The Beatles appeal amongst female youths by presenting a more democratic and equal partnership within the band.

Without explicitly doing so, Cura presents The Beatles as one of the first archetypical boy bands—running in a similar vein to those seen in the “height” of the boy band era, in the 1990’s to the early 2000’s, with a resurgence of the model coming back in 2010. Did they have sensitive, emotional lyrics that provide agency and worth to young female listeners? Check. What about a subdued and caring persona, just masculine enough to ignite the female fantasy without being intimidating or unapproachable? Definitely. The Beatles were the first, and certainly not the last, to capitalize on the demographic of young and impressionable teenage girls, and this kind of model (although modified a bit for the contextual, social, and political climate of the time) was also used by some of the most famous boy bands in history, as previously mentioned: the Backstreet Boys, NSYNC, and the modern equivalent of “Beatlemania,” fellow Brit import One Direction.

However, despite the obvious ties to earlier forms of boy bands like The Beatles (or, even, The Rolling Stones), the bubble-gum pop genre of music most strongly associated with the modern boy band is frequently the site of both ridicule and

condescension. In his essay “Multiple Damnations: Deconstructing The Critical Response To Boy Band Phenomena,” Duffett’s multi-faceted approach to the deconstruction of boy bands in terms of authenticity, critical response, exploitation, and youth culture provides a comprehensive examination of how boy bands as a genre and as a performing entity have both evolved and remained static since their inception in the 1980’s. He also interrogates the meanings and implications of the perceived “seduction” of the female audience that is the boy band’s primary market, linking this formulaic tactic back to ideas of the boy band genre’s credibility and inferiority within the music industry, as decided by both “anti-fans” and musical critics alike.

Duffett highlights is how the genre of the boy band has been categorized as musically inferior to other genres—specifically, more overtly “manly” genres of music, such as metal or even rock—through the performances of the boy band members, the kinds of music they are making, anti-fan reactions and online discussions of the genre, as well the female demographic that they are primarily appealing to (and the parents that fund their daughters interest in these bands). He invokes the media scholar Tara Brabazon, who concretely states, “The audience for boy bands was and is clearly defined. It is young and female.” She also highlights the formulaic nature of boy bands as a group, a point that Duffett takes even further by theorizing that boy bands “are really conceived, reproduced, and deployed as *boyfriend bands*, a point that makes them a formula rather than a genre” (191).

This formula, a highly constructed and marketed ploy, revolves around “a prescribed form of audience identification as its central convention,” and further connects the questions surrounding the authenticity of the genre to the perceived inferiority of boy

bands through their success as defined by hormonal, love-sick young girls that propel them to financial and popular fame. “In a music industry that simultaneously treats teen girls as the most lucrative consumers but the least respected audience,” music critic and photographer Ariel Lebeau states, “One Direction speaks directly to them and says something that their demographic doesn’t get to hear as much as it should: You are important” (Lebeau, 2015). Lyrically, the frequently heard messages of importance and worth as directed to these young female fans are a staple of the boy band genre, and it is this girl-friendly lyrical trend that further pushes the formulaic boy band platform as a positive, safe space for these developing girls to combat the more negative messages of inadequacy, unrealistic beauty standards, and limitation—usually aimed at female audiences—that inundate the mainstream media.

The Magic Formula

So what exactly is this formula for success that the 90’s boy bands set in place as models for the future generations of gentle heartbreakers? The specific success of a boy band does carry with it a certain set of characteristics that have proven effective in the past that the BSB and NSYNC perfected. Like the definition of “boy band” provided above explicitly states, the most successful boy bands have all consisted of young, attractive males with above-average musical ability. This list of prerequisites is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of successfully following this formula perfectly. As Cook said, “the focus [of the female gaze] isn’t just on their junk or abs, it will also show that he’s intimate, dorky, talented, funny or friendly.” It is these personality traits—coupled with the good looks and musical talent necessary in maintaining success—that so effectively hooks and secures the female fan bases that are essential to any boy band’s popularity.

Lou Pearlman, the mastermind behind both the Backstreet Boys and NSYNC, effectively mastered the use of this formula, proven through the success of both these two bands, as well as the subsequent musical acts he worked with afterwards. "You need someone with dark hair, someone with light hair, someone with medium hair," Pearlman said on the subject of appearance. "You need at least three strong lead singers. And they have to be young and clean-cut, parent-friendly" (Hiltbrand, 2004). Zena Burns, the music editor for *Teen People*, has this to say on the matter: "you have the really cute one, the one who's not so cute, the shy one, and the goofy one." A closer examination of this formula in action as seen in three archetypal boy bands from the 1990's and 2010's that meticulously follow this formula can help illuminate exactly how the formulaic presentation of these personified characters is both executed and maintained.

Backstreet Boys: Each member, as Burns said, is associated with a certain "role" within the band; this distinctive characterization is still a crucial aspect of the boy band genre, which will be discussed later. In the BSB, the roles were as follows: the "flirt," the "gentleman," the "sporty one," the "serious one," and of course, the "prankster."⁷ Though these assigned labels generally fit the natural personality of each member, an exaggeration of reputation for marketing purposes was not entirely unheard of, and is certainly still used today. For example, member Kevin Richardson, otherwise known as the "gentleman," was often mistakenly assumed to be a "killer" with the ladies, though his naturally shy demeanor projected a different image entirely (Svokos).

Misrepresentation of identity is something seen often in the current boy band market, and

⁷ These "roles" are as described on biographies page from one of the many Backstreet Boys fan-run websites, <http://www.backstreet.net>

both NSYNC and One Direction have certainly had their fair share of rumors regarding their image in both the public and private eye.

NSYNC: Similar to their label mates, NSYNC also personified members as fitting a certain role, often exaggerated for characterization purposes. In their case, the roles include: the “Southern Mama’s boy,” the “nice, friendly one,” the “shy, pensive one,” the “wild, flirty one” and finally, “the jokester” (Toure). Though not identical to the roles undertaken by the BSB, there is a consistent pattern visible in what types of boys both the management companies and consumers are paying attention to.

One Direction: Unsurprisingly, the members of One Direction each embody a similar role within the band—though the shift in their roles over the years is certainly a new adaptation of the formula used by both of their boy band predecessors. Fans know the One Direction boys as being either the “mysterious bad boy,” the “charming flirt,” the “cute jock,” the “sensible one,” and naturally, the “funny” one (Bartolomeo). While there has been a dispute within the fandom over the correctness of some of these reputations—notably, with member Harry Styles getting the label of “flirtatious ladies man”—they are marketed as such in a very similar way to the BSB and NSYNC. Also notable is the shift in these “roles” after the departure of Zayn Malik from the band in January 2015: his absence as “the mysterious bad boy” led to a rearrangement of all the previously established roles within the band, shifting roles such as “the funny one” (belonging to member Louis Tomlinson) to “wild, unruly party animal,” and “charming flirt” (belonging to member Harry Styles) to “kind, sensitive fashion icon.” These shifts also represent the aging interests and responses from their original fan base, necessary in

maintaining the same levels of success seen when the band first came to fruition—especially when their attention to their American audience.

Like A Fine Wine: Aging Female Audiences and a Craving for More

As these young girls grow up, it is precisely these aging interests and maturation in desire accompanying their development into young women (and more prominently independent consumers) that drives another highly-profitable media sphere with a primarily female audience: romantic comedy films. With the framework of the female gaze firmly in place through previous—or even continuing—attachments to the identifiably characterized boy band members and their “unique” personality traits, the natural progression from longing for these sensitive, caring teenage heartthrobs to instead desiring a similarly-manufactured “ideal man,” complete with endearing personality traits, an older, less boyish body to sexualize, and an emotional sensitivity concomitant with his role within the film as being “Mr. Right.” Because a majority of romantic comedy films, or “rom-coms,” focus centrally on the female protagonist’s quest to find and secure a loving, satisfying relationship with a handsome, compatible man, a natural sort of nostalgia for the boy banders of these aging female audiences is specifically capitalized upon and marketed towards by this film genre.

The many years spent listening to dreamy, fresh-faced teenage hunks sing about wanting true love and appreciating each and every aspect of these girls creates this idealized male partner: someone who is wholly devoted to and unabashedly in love with the female object of his affection—and, for the most part, exceptionally good looking as well. The female audiences’ identification with the rom-com heroine is partially rooted in

their yearning for this “dream” guy, and their eagerness to see a happy ending between the two characters—therefore, a vicariously-lived happy ending of their own—pushes the success of these films and the genre as a whole to new heights. In her critical essay, “What Have Clothes Got To Do With It?: Romantic Comedy And The Female Gaze,” Paula Cohen analyzes the ways in which this identification with the female lead is solidified through the audiences’ feelings towards the male lead. Illustrating one of the main appeals of this genre to female audiences, Cohen speaks about the female audience’s relation to the final “coming together” of the leading female and male characters: “This is what women want: to find themselves, not reduced or negated, but set off and amplified by a partner who, literally, fits them like a well-tailored dress” (86).

Musical Numbers and Muscles and Male Entertainers, Oh My!

If the identification of the female audience with the on-screen female lead and their desire to emulate her successful quest for love with the male lead is integral to the success of a rom-com, then how is that “Magic Mike: XXL” opened to the previously mentioned 96% female audience—and made a decent enough profit to consider it an achievement? While the original “Magic Mike,” the surprise 2012 hit once dubbed: “The Citizen Kane of stripper movies,”⁸ made an impressive \$114 million (with an estimated \$7 million budget—that’s a return of investment of 1,525%), the film’s sequel made a respectable \$66 million, with double the budget of the original⁹ (Acuna, 2015). Critically, “MM:XXL” received praise from not only film and cinematic critics, but feminist

⁸ Hilariously dubbed as such by Entertainment Weekly’s Libby Gelman-Waxner, found at: <http://www.ew.com/article/2012/05/11/ask-libby-magic-mike>

⁹ All numerical data taken from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=magicmike2.htm>

scholars, bloggers, and amateur audiences alike, begging the question: what about this film—featuring five chisled and hunky leading men, with no female protagonist in sight for the primary demographic audience to identify with—made it one of the most female-positive challenger of traditional masculinity and stereotypical gender roles in all of cinematic history?

To contextualize the film, a little background information is necessary to fully appreciate the feminist ideology and function of the female gaze within the film—especially as viewed through a lens incorporating the “boy band formula” discussed previously. Set three years after the original, “MM:XXL” follows Mike Lane (Channing Tatum) as he reunites with his old crew, the “Kings of Tampa,” a troupe of male entertainers who have hit a rough patch in their careers, and decide to find themselves on one last roadtrip as a group—to a stripper convention in Florida. The sequel focuses on cultivating the characters and personalities of the rest of Mike’s crew, rather than the romantic plotline culminating in Mike “getting the girl” as featured in the original, and the spotlight on the self-referential bromances existing between each of the muscled, refreshingly emotional hunks solidifies this film as an atypical member of the romantic comedy genre.

Embracing The Woman and Her Ultimate Fantasy

On the one hand, the female appeal of a comedic, erotic dance movie featuring a group of scantily-clothed, good-looking men may seem obvious; the film itself may as well advertise itself as a two-hour long celebration of female sexuality. Elinor Jones praises the sex-positive presentation of female pleasure as worthy and deserving of

attention in her aptly titled article, “Magic Mike XXL Is the Feminist Male Stripper Movie You've Been Waiting For.” Jones praises the film’s characterization of men as respectful of women, rather than “seeing women as nothing but orifices and/or nags,” as can often happen in movies that feature a main cast of entirely young, good-looking dudes. Further, she also notes that—although be it a small victory—the intentional syntax used when the “Kings of Tampa” discuss their “sexual conquests” is empowering women by making them the active party instead of degrading them. For example, the men asking each other, “She bang you?” rather than “You fuck her?” is a refreshing transfer of power from the traditionally active male to the historically passive female voice, and one not seen too often in a movie full of strippers.

In a similar vein, the powerful role of female sexuality and the body (of all shapes, sizes, ages, and colors) was not lost on the overwhelmingly female audiences that flocked to see this film, especially on opening weekend. Elizabeth King detailed the unique adventure of sharing her “MM: XXL” viewing experience with the rest of the audience in her piece, “In “Magic Mike XXL,” The Star Of The Show Is Women's Pleasure.” Joyously, King discusses the camaraderie and unity she underwent at her showing of “MM: XXL,” in which the experience of watching the film with a theater-full of women proved to be the best part about it. The coming together of women to celebrate female sexuality and express desire in such a way that would traditionally be frowned upon—loudly, proudly, and without fear of judgment. “There were shouts of “Amen!” and “Hallelujah!” She recants, “There were sassy “mmmmhmm!”s, giggles, guffaws, shouts, clapping, fanning, and shrieking. “It was a gleeful and riotous celebration of what we find sexy.” Corrina Antrobus, head of the feminist film festival the “Bechdel Test

Fest,” had this to say on the film’s female-friendly position: “The beauty of *Magic Mike XXL* isn’t just the obvious pander to the female gaze, it’s also in the subtle nod to the sects of women often dismissed by cinema; women of colour, women over a size 8 and women approaching middle-age” (Webb). It is rare for a film to provide such a space for female audiences, but the extent to which this movie is geared towards the almost entirely female crowd that attended opening weekend is truly refreshing in an industry that is so deeply entrenched in sexism.

However, to dismiss the female appeal of “*MM: XXL*” as simply existing through this one facet of the film’s feminist undertones would be to ignore the growth that the audience’s socialized female gaze, intrinsically embedded in this film in more ways in one, has gone through—particularly as cultivated during the “boy band” phase of its development. In essence, the five leading men of “*MM: XXL*” can absolutely be categorized as the boy band 2.0: otherwise known as, “not your daughter’s boy band.” The characterizations of these five, muscled-but-misunderstood dreamboats matches the previously discussed marketing model of the boy band, and a deeper look at the identities that are developed throughout this film can help illuminate how this grown-up version of a boy band appeals so strongly to female audiences. The particular roles each man plays within their squad are even self-referenced by “Big Dick” Richie (Joe Manginello), who observes that their rag-tag bunch consists of “two freak shows, one who can barely dance. One... person of color?...[and] one snowy white Ken doll for all those good little Christian women” (*Magic Mike: XXL*). He even concludes his inventory-taking by exclaiming, “I mean, what the fuck more do you need?”

Boy Bands 2.0: All Grown Up

The glaring similarities between the men of “MM: XXL” and the formulaic structure of the more wholesome boy bands that these same female audience members once worshipped are enough to identify this movie as capitalizing on the nostalgic appeal of the “boy band generation,” but the invocation does not stop there. Richie explicitly references the Backstreet Boys as he indignantly corrects Mike for mistaking Justin Timberlake as a member (“You fucking kidding me? Justin was in NSYNC. Kevin Richardson came back to Backstreet in 2012. Get your Orlando history straight”), and this direct shoutout to one of the most quintessential boy bands of all time serves as a direct link between the matured female audiences that grew up on the BSB and the sympathy garnered for Richie’s character through his knowledge of the topic—a far cry from the interests one would traditionally associate with such a masculine figure.

However, not even this blatant of a boy band reference can top one of the most memorable scenes in the film, in which Richie performs a strip-tease in a gas station convenience store to, arguably, the most iconic boy band song of all time: “I Want It That Way” by the Backstreet Boys. To contextualize, the Kings of Tampa, having just taken some magic mushrooms, are going through what can only be described as an identity crisis: Richie’s character is starting to question his place in the group, and has doubts about the “fireman routine” he has used in performances for the last few years. Deciding he needs to “find himself” through a new concept and song, the rest of the boys challenge him to make the solumn-looking teenage girl behind the counter crack a smile. He struts purposefully into the generic-looking shop, and, seeing that his presence has not been

noticed yet, looks up at the speakers in the ceiling as the infamous opening guitar notes of “I Want It That Way” begins to play.

What transpires next can only be described as a teenage girl’s dream come true: Richie proceeds to slowly bend over, with his rear end facing the female clerk, who still has not noticed him, and is visibly disappointed when she still doesn’t look at his intentionally positioned posterior. From this point onwards, Richie throws himself into the spontaneously-created routine—with sporadic cuts to the rest of the gang as they watch through the window, shouting and nodding their encouragements—proceeding to rip open a bag of Cheetos, douse himself in a freshly-opened bottle of water, and body-roll his way over to the cashier, who has, naturally, started to watch his every move. The impromptu show ends with a shirtless Richie sauntering up to the counter and asking in a particularly husky voice, “How much for the Cheetos and water?”, earning a smile from the formerly-sullen cashier (who, somehow, managed to keep a straight face throughout Richie’s impassioned performance), much to the delight of the rest of the men outside watching.

Not only was this scene a deliberate gift on the part of the filmmakers to the female audience members who grew up loving that classic boy band song, but the eventual success in making the female clerk smile directly references what it is about boy bands that makes them so easy to adore: they care about their female audiences, and want nothing more than to see them happy. It is through these various allusions to the female teenage nostalgia and boy bands, coupled with the proud embrace of female sexuality and pleasure, that make “MM: XXL” so unique in its construction and use of the female gaze. The gratuitous objectification of the male body throughout the entirety of the

movie is, undeniably, quite enjoyable, but it is the further incorporation of the sentimental and emotional components of the female gaze that truly mark it as a feminist film worthy of praise.

Gazing Towards the Future: Where Will Women Look Next?

“*Magic Mike: XXL*” is certainly an anomaly within the Hollywood industry, but its success and its purpose are hopeful steps towards a more inclusive, female-friendly Hollywood of tomorrow. Laura Mulvey herself acknowledged “that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it” (16), and in coining the phrase “the male gaze” and beginning the dialogue concerning its role in the cinematic industry, she provided the tools necessary in the deconstruction of the unconscious, as seen in classical cinema, that is “structured...within the language of the patriarchy” (15). By critically examining the masculine power structures institutionally and inherently intertwined within the entire Hollywood industry, the dominant patriarchal perspective can begin to be dismantled. Mulvey recognized that the male gaze is deeply imbedded within visual culture, to the point where “there is no way in which we can produce an alternative out of the blue,” but suggesting that analyzing and critiquing the state of masculine cinematic culture is the definite way to begin the gendered dialogue of how film is seen.

As far as the “female gaze” is concerned, there is still much work left to be done in order to fully flesh out its role and importance within the larger context of the persisting male dominance in the entertainment industry. For one thing, much of the gaze (as discussed in this paper) has centered on the traditional positioning of a binary, heterosexual understanding of the look, as it is presented in the aggressively-heterosexual

visual environment that is the “Magic Mike” universe. Through further discussion of the gaze as appropriated and reworked by different audiences outside of the traditional binary and heterosexual nature of the Hollywood gaze, more opportunity and visibility for these groups can come from the perspectives gained by venturing outside the “norm” of Hollywood, thus supplementing the necessary work that must continue in order to make the cinema a more inclusive, better represented media sphere.

The existence of films like “MM: XXL” are a refreshing look at the kinds of content that, though sparsely featured so explicitly, are a welcome change in a world of highly sexualized female bodies and male entitlement. However, it cannot be ignored that, despite all its work pushing a more feminist cinematic culture, “Magic Mike: XXL” is still, after all, a film about men, starring almost all men, made by—you guessed it—men. Someday, in the hopefully not-too-distant future, the female audiences and media-creators of today and tomorrow will have more opportunity to see a better reflection of their desires and dreams on the screen, and have the power to be the ones to finally and freely say, “I Want It That Way.”

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