

# Book Reviews



# Dissecting and Defying the Male Gaze

Review of *Women Filmmakers and the  
Visual Politics of Transnational China  
in the #MeToo Era* by Gina Marchetti,  
Amsterdam University Press, 2024

CAMERON L. WHITE

Gina Marchetti's *Women Filmmakers and the Visual Politics of Transnational China in the #MeToo Era* is a prescient book at the intersection of Chinese film studies, feminist screen theory, and the study of social movements in the digital age. Analyzing a wealth of filmic texts as well as structures of film production and dissemination across mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and beyond, Marchetti provides critical context to the #MeToo movement in regions often overlooked by Western scholars and media. However, the globally resonant #MeToo is only part of Marchetti's analysis. Not only does she engage with films that center gender in narrating indigenous social movements, including Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement and Taiwan's Sunflower Movement, but she also tackles more diffuse forms of visual activism, such as how women filmmakers in mainland China have responded to forms of gender-based oppression and violence symptomatic of state surveillance and neoliberal capitalism in the post-Mao era. The book is rich in cinematic examples and references to screen theory, making it a valuable read for film and media scholars regardless of regional expertise.

That being said, Marchetti's work stands out further when read against other approaches to "the transnational" in Chinese film studies. As Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim have pointed out, "Scholarship on Chinese

cinemas has been at the forefront of the theorizing [of] the transnational.”<sup>1</sup> However, some of this pioneering can be traced back to a particular anxiety beginning in the 1990s, when scholars in the field found themselves trying to reconcile Hong Kong’s colonial history, complex sovereignty issues in the Taiwan Strait, and diasporic film culture with the dominance of the *national* cinemas framework in film studies writ large.<sup>2</sup> Thus, when a scholar raises the “transnational” in Chinese film studies, there is a question of what it is being invoked in relation *to*, with variations of “the nation” an evergreen object of concern.<sup>3</sup> However, the “transnational” explored by Marchetti is more interested in the “trans” than the “national,” with the concept gaining critical value through attention to issues of cross-border and cross-language address, what it means for media to travel among regions subject to different political regimes, and issues of global feminist activism.<sup>4</sup>

Marchetti structures the first part of her project as a series of essays expanding on the concept of the male gaze, with chapter 1 bringing well-known theorists like Laura Mulvey and Claire Johnston in conversation with the regional specificities of #MeToo in East Asia. Touching on prominent incidents of sexual violence and harassment in connection to film industries in Hong Kong, Beijing, and elsewhere, Marchetti demonstrates the awful extent of the transgressions of Harvey Weinstein and some of his associates as well as the degree to which structural issues of gender violence persist in

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1. Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim, “Concepts of transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies,” *Transnational Cinemas* 1, no. 1 (2010): 14.
  2. See Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, “Historical Introduction: Chinese Cinemas (1896–1996) and Transnational Film Studies,” in *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 1–31.
  3. Particularly influential these days is Shih Shu-mei’s paradigm of the “Sinophone,” a framework developed in response to questions of empire and ethno-nationalist hegemony, which has been adapted by film scholars to describe Chinese-language cinemas from a variety of regions. See Audrey Yeh and Olivia Khoo, eds., *Sinophone Cinemas* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
  4. It also dovetails with other recent projects reconciling the mission of transnational feminist cinema with the documentation of Chinese film history. See Lingzhen Wang, *Revisiting Women’s Cinema* (Duke University Press, 2021).

film schools, production companies, and academia in configurations that cut across borders. Marchetti argues that contemporary attention to women filmmakers is necessary in countering the overwhelming influence of the male gaze, writing, “As feminist research on global screen culture demonstrates, female filmmakers see the world differently, and the cinematic gaze fractures to include the look, the stare, the leer, the glare, the glimpse and the glance as well as intersectional, oppositional, alienated, queer and other critical gazes.”<sup>5</sup> Marchetti takes time to focus subsequent chapters on these variations on the gaze, using a handful of well-chosen films to illustrate what they are and how they function.

For instance, chapter 2 centers on “the look” and “the stare,” the former pluralized both in terms of an action (i.e., how women are looked at and overlooked) as well as a noun (i.e., the look of a Chinese woman under neoliberal capitalism). Marchetti delves into the “political and economic aspects of women’s visibility,” unpacking how expectations of how women should appear to derive from consumer culture and economic policies that exacerbate precarity, causing many women to be “left behind, left out, or ‘leftover’”—the latter referring to a term in contemporary China for women who remain unmarried after their late twenties.<sup>6</sup> Aubrey Lam’s *The Truth About Beauty* (2014), a film satirizing contemporary fixations on plastic surgery in cosmopolitan Beijing, proves an apt example to analyze a feminist challenge to the visual coding of both sexual desirability and corporate success. Marchetti adds productive complexity by following this analysis with a look at Ann Hui’s short film *My Way* (2012), significant not only textually for its approach to the topic of gender transition surgery but also in terms of distribution. The film was commissioned by the Hong Kong International Film Festival yet its abbreviated nature and buy-in from YouKu, one of mainland China’s primary online video platforms, meant that the film

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5. Gina Marchetti, *Women Filmmakers and the Visual Politics of Transnational China in the #MeToo Era* (Amsterdam University Press, 2024), 17.

6. Marchetti, *Women Filmmakers*, 61.

“explore[s] sexual minorities for audiences that may not have access to feature films on topics censored in the PRC.”<sup>7</sup> Details like these exemplify the larger rhythm of Marchetti’s work, which complements filmic analysis with attention to issues of industry and audience.

Chapter 3 and chapter 4 continue the elaboration on gazes, the former deconstructing “the leer” and the “the glare” and the latter “the glimpse” and “the glance.” These pairings speak to a larger duality at the heart of Marchetti’s theorization, with the visual politics of men’s lust contrasted against desires to control, devalue, and disregard women. Chapter 3 also makes connections between state surveillance and gender that reverberate in later chapters of the book. The author works with two films— Nanfu Wang’s *Hooligan Sparrow* (2016) and Vivian Qu’s *Angels Wear White* (2017)—to demonstrate how the “moralizing glare” of authority during investigations of suppressed cases of sexual assault ally with both patriarchal and state authority.<sup>8</sup> Chapter 5 provides an interesting variation on the “queer gaze,” with Marchetti singling out two films from the perspective of straight daughters of lesbian mothers, Huang Hui-chen’s *Small Talk* (2016) and Lisa Zi Xiang’s *A Dog Barking at the Moon* (2019). Similarities in the on-screen treatment of food and the daughters’ attitudes toward their respective mothers’ queer identities enhances the dialogic analysis. This intergenerational comparison is complicated by the fact that Huang’s work is filmed in Taiwan and Xiang’s in mainland China, and Marchetti shrewdly points out that differences in political systems and access to marriage rights are not the only salient factors in evaluating on-screen queerness on the two sides of the Taiwan Strait; class and educational background are important, too.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 pull the book toward works Marchetti more explicitly categorizes as “media activism.”<sup>9</sup> While the films vary in terms of subject region and political/social movement, they present telling examples of how

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7. Marchetti, 79.

8. Marchetti, 116.

9. Marchetti, 183.

the politics of feminist filmmaking intersect with gendered experiences of protest and resistance. Technologies of filming and collaboration become an increasingly important bridge toward wider theoretical concepts; for example, Marchetti makes an intriguing connection between Donna Haraway and Dziga Vertov in contextualizing the transnational trio of Zeng Jinyan, Huang Wenhui, and Trish McAdam behind *Outcry and Whisper* (2020), which interweaves the concerns of feminist art and labor activism in southern China.<sup>10</sup> Chapter 9 shifts away from films of contemporary social movements, instead featuring work that revisits past Western images of China to deconstruct on-screen orientalism and links between colonialism, the female body, and disease. Situating her readings amid reports of anti-Asian violence against women that appeared across the globe in the wake of COVID-19, Marchetti suggests the callousness of contemporary prejudice and misogyny is less unfortunate aberrance than disturbing recapitulation.

Marchetti ends her book with a turn to women filmmakers of the Chinese diaspora working in the United States, with much of the focus on Lulu Wang's *The Farewell* (2019), a film about a lie that nonetheless offers the value of truth. Marchetti touches on similar anxiety over veracity and deception in discussions of Wang's peers, like Cathy Yan and Chloé Zhao, who despite critical success have faced numerous hurdles of perception while working in the liminal space between US and PRC cinema. In contrast to recent large-scale studies of the relationship between the US and Chinese film industries,<sup>11</sup> Marchetti productively recalibrates the conversation around individual women filmmakers and their contributions to global visual culture. Their work implicates persistent structures of patriarchy in both Los Angeles and Beijing while also reaffirming the possibility of cinema to resist gender oppression and recast ways of seeing.

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10. Marchetti, 203.

11. See Aynne Kokas, *Hollywood Made in China* (University of California Press, 2017); Ying Zhu, *Hollywood in China: Behind the Scenes of the World's Largest Movie Market* (New Press, 2022).

