

Empowered Angels or Gazing Spectacles? Unraveling the Male Gaze in *Charlie's Angels* Films

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Abstract

*This research examines the evolving representations of female identity and the persistent influence of the male gaze within the *Charlie's Angels* films (2000, 2003, and 2019 versions). Drawing on Laura Mulvey's seminal concept of the male gaze and subsequent feminist film theory, this research employs a qualitative content analysis approach. The methodology involves a comparative analysis of specific scenes, character interactions, and cinematographic techniques—such as camera angles, and costume design—to discern how female characters are positioned and perceived. Preliminary findings indicate a complex interplay between overt attempts at female empowerment and the subtle persistence of the male gaze across all three film versions, with varying degrees of intensity. The 2000 and 2003 adaptations often present a paradoxical depiction where the Angels' assertiveness is frequently framed to prioritize aesthetic appeal, while the 2019 film, despite aiming for overt subversion, still grapples with visual conventions that inadvertently align with objectifying representations. These observations highlight the pervasive nature of the male gaze in popular cinema, even in productions explicitly aiming to challenge gender norms, underscoring the deeply embedded patriarchal viewing conventions within the film-making industry. This continuous negotiation underscores the ongoing relevance of critical discourse analysis in understanding gender narratives within popular culture.*

Keywords : *Female identity; male gaze; female empowerment; charlie's angels films*

INTRODUCTION

The enduring popularity of the Charlie's Angels films offers a compelling lens through which to examine the evolving representations of female identity and the persistent influence of the male gaze in popular culture. This phenomenon is particularly pertinent given that films serve as significant cultural reflections, often mirroring and shaping societal gender ideologies (Afifulloh, 2025). The persistent portrayal of women in films, particularly through frameworks such as the male gaze, underscores a critical academic discourse on cinematic representations and their broader societal impact (Oliver, 2017). Historically, film narratives have frequently positioned male characters as dominant subjects and active protagonists, secluding women to passive roles or as objects of spectacle (Sari, 2022). While these historical depictions generally align with traditional gender norms, some narratives have, on occasion, presented women who challenge these constraints (Trisnawati et al., 2025).

The intricate relationship between cinematic portrayals and societal gender roles has been a cornerstone of media studies, with particular attention paid to how media constructs and disseminates gendered meanings (Sachar, 2024; Trisnawati et al., 2025). Previous scholarship, particularly stemming from Laura Mulvey's seminal work, has extensively analyzed how classical Hollywood cinema is structured to appeal to the heterosexual male gaze, often reducing female characters to visual objects. While previous studies have analyzed individual *Charlie's Angels* films or the male gaze in broader contexts (e.g., Belle et al., 2023, focused on the 2019 film's post-feminist sensibilities), a comprehensive comparative analysis across the 2000, 2003, and 2019 versions, specifically examining the evolving interplay between overt empowerment and subtle objectification through visual and narrative elements, remains underexplored. This study contributes to the literature by offering a detailed diachronic perspective on how these popular culture texts negotiate the male gaze amidst changing gender ideologies, thereby illuminating the persistent challenges in fully subverting patriarchal viewing conventions even in productions explicitly aiming for female agency. (Belle et al., 2023). Specifically, this study delves into how the *Charlie's Angels* films navigate the tension between empowering female protagonists and surrendering to conventional gendered viewing pleasures, thereby offering insights into the complex interplay of agency and objectification within mainstream cinema (Oliver, 2017). This research aims to critically analyze the construction of gender identity and the manifestation of the male gaze across different iterations of the Charlie's Angels films, focusing on the visual and narrative elements of the Charlie's Angels films released in 2000, 2003, and 2019. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the visual and narrative elements in the 2000 and 2003 Charlie's Angels films manifest the male gaze in their portrayal of female empowerment?

2. To what extent does the 2019 Charlie's Angels film attempt to subvert the male gaze, and how successful are these efforts?
3. What is the nature of the continuous negotiation between depicting female agency and adhering to established visual pleasure paradigms across the three film versions?

To critically analyze this complex interplay, the subsequent sections will first establish the theoretical framework underpinning gender representation in film, followed by a detailed methodological approach.

Literature Review

Central to this discussion is Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, which posits that cinematic narratives and visual aesthetics are often constructed from a patriarchal perspective, positioning the female body as an object for male visual pleasure (Belle et al., 2023). Mulvey's foundational work, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," articulates how this scopophilic dynamic often reduces women to passive figures, thereby reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies within cinematic representation (Mulvey, 1975). Her theory emphasizes that the camera acts as an extension of the male spectator's eye, constructing a narrative in which women are "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Oliver, 2017). This theoretical framework explains how cinema can perpetuate symbolic violence against women by presenting them primarily as objects vulnerable to male perception rather than as subjects with their own agency (Sari, 2022). Mulvey further elaborated on this by arguing that even the movement of female characters in film can be interpreted as a means of fixing them within the male gaze, thus transforming female characters into possessable images (Oliver, 2017).

However, subsequent scholarship has critiqued and expanded upon Mulvey's concept, exploring the nuances of female spectatorship and the potential for subversion within patriarchal cinematic structures. For instance, some scholars argue that a "female gaze" can exist, offering an alternative perspective that prioritizes female subjectivity and experience, thereby challenging traditional male-centric narratives (Chen, 2024). Beyond Mulvey's concept, contemporary feminist film theorists have further interrogated the complexities of female representation, particularly in an era often characterized by post-feminism, where discussions around gender equality are familiar yet traditional gender roles persist (Sachar, 2024). These contemporary approaches consider how the media simultaneously presents images of empowered women while subtly reinforcing the idea of traditional gender expectations and objectification, often under the 'mask' of female choice or agency (Oliver, 2017).

Such analyses delve into how empowering narratives can subtly reinforce traditional gender expectations, a phenomenon particularly relevant to understanding the complexities of female representation in action films (Sachar, 2024). This nuanced perspective is crucial for understanding how the

Charlie's Angels films, despite their overt celebration of female strength and teamwork, may still unintentionally reproduce elements of the male gaze through visual framing and narrative conventions. Therefore, this study analyzes the cinematic techniques and narrative choices employed in the Charlie's Angels films to uncover how these films negotiate the fine line between female empowerment and the perpetuation of objectifying gazes. Specifically, this study examines how the 2000, 2003, and 2019 versions of Charlie's Angels reflect varying degrees of conventional male gaze structures while simultaneously attempting to portray empowered female protagonists.

METHOD

A qualitative content analysis was employed to systematically examine cinematic female identity in the Charlie's Angels films (2000, 2003, and 2019). This approach allows for a detailed investigation of recurring themes, visual motifs, and narrative structures that contribute to the construction of female identity and the manifestation of the male gaze within these popular cultural texts (Afifulloh, 2025). Drawing on a comparative analysis of the 2000, 2003, and 2019 film versions, the study meticulously analyzes specific scenes and cinematographic techniques to uncover how each film either reinforces or challenges traditional gender stereotypes (Belle et al., 2023; Zhang, 2024). Specifically, this includes scrutinizing camera angles, costume design, and dialogue to discern how female characters are positioned and perceived by the presumed audience (Ridaryanthi and Sinuyul, 2021). This allows for a nuanced understanding of how visual and narrative elements are combined to shape perceptions of female agency and objectification across films (Javed et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Preliminary findings from the qualitative content analysis of the Charlie's Angels films (specifically the 2000, 2003, and 2019 versions) indicate a complex interplay between overt attempts at female empowerment and the subtle, persistent manifestation of the male gaze (Belle et al., 2023). While each adaptation navigates this tension with varying degrees of intensity, a consistent pattern emerges: the films often depict female protagonists exhibiting physical prowess and assertiveness, yet simultaneously frame them in ways that prioritize aesthetic appeal over functional capabilities, aligning with established male viewing pleasure (Lenhard et al., 2000). On one hand, the Angels — portrayed by Cameron Diaz, Drew Barrymore, and Lucy Liu — are action heroines showcasing intelligence, skill, and fierce independence, aligned with the emerging third-wave feminism's celebration of empowered femininity. However, these films aggressively exploit their bodies visually. For instance, slow-motion shots and close-ups emphasize the Angels' legs and hips, transforming their physicality into fetishized objects for the male viewer's scopophilic pleasure.

Building on these observations, the Charlie's Angels films offer a compelling case study for exploring how popular media navigates the legacy of Laura Mulvey's Male Gaze theory. This theory posits that women are often depicted in cinema as passive objects for visual pleasure under a heteronormative male perspective, manifesting through specific cinematic techniques such as slow-motion sensual close-ups and camera angles. Specifically, the 2000 and 2003 adaptations, both directed by McG, are considered examples of women objectification and sexualization. The 2000 remake of Charlie's Angels extensively employs cinematographic techniques that reinforce the male gaze. For example, the opening scenes of the 2000 and the 2003 version explicitly feature the Angels in tight swimsuits, highlighting voyeurism through a deliberate camera focus on their bodies. This visual framing prioritizes their aesthetic appeal, transforming them into spectacles despite their active roles. The overall narrative of these early films is largely controlled by a patriarchal authority figure, Charlie, further embedding traditional gender hierarchies.

A memorable scene from the 2000 film version shows Natalie Cook (Diaz) dancing sensually in a nightclub with the camera lingering on her body parts. In this scene, Natalie wears a tight red dress and performs a sensual dance on stage. The cinematography employs slow-motion close-ups focusing on her hips, legs, and body movements, accompanied by rhythmic music that heightens sensuality. According to Mulvey's Male Gaze, this scene objectifies Natalie's body for visual pleasure, positioning her as a passive object for the heterosexual male viewer's scopophilic gaze. This fetishistic filming causes the audience to consume her as a visual fantasy rather than recognize her as an intelligent, active secret agent.



Picture 1
Mulvey's Male Gaze in the *Charlie's Angels* 2000 film version

As illustrated in Picture 1, the scene from the 2000 film exemplifies Mulvey's Male Gaze. Picture 1 shows Natalie Cook (Diaz) in a tight red dress during the nightclub scene, illustrating the use of slow-motion close-ups on her hips and legs, consistent with Mulvey's concept of objectification.

Furthermore, the 2003 film further strengthens this pattern of sensuality and objectifying humor. This is evident in nightclub fight scenes that emphasize exaggerated body poses and utilize fragmented close-ups of female

bodies, thereby reducing them to their physical forms rather than their agency in combat. These earlier iterations, while presenting female agency, often do so within a framework that implicitly reinforces Mulvey's concept of women as "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Oliver, 2017; Sari, 2022).



Picture 2
Mulvey's Male Gaze in the *Charlie's Angels* 2003 film version

Based on the picture 2 above, the angels' attire further highlights this phenomenon; their form-fitting outfits, bikinis worn during action sequences, and accessories that emphasize their sexuality all function as elements for male fantasy consumption, despite the narratives simultaneously stressing their capabilities. Alex Munday, whose portrayal in leather dominatrix clothing strikingly illustrates this point: her depicted authority is directly linked to male sexual fantasies, creating a mix of empowerment and fetishization. In the sequel, Alex Munday takes on the persona of a dominant school teacher, dressed in a tight leather bodysuit and carrying a whip—an outfit and context heavily loaded with sexual fantasy. Camera angles, specifically those moving from low to high, accentuate her body, thereby reinforcing the fetishization and sexual power associated with male dominance fantasies. Even though Alex is presented as powerful, this power is constructed through a visual male fantasy, underscoring the patriarchal framework within which female agency is depicted. The application of slow motion and concentrated shots on sensual body parts converts her into an aesthetic spectacle, echoing Mulvey's concept of being "to-be-looked-at-ness".

In contrast, the 2019 film attempts to explicitly subvert these traditional tropes, striving for a narrative and visual approach that foregrounds female subjectivity and agency. Director Elizabeth Banks's approach emphasizes female solidarity, equal relationships, and character agency, consciously aiming to reduce visual objectification and center the female narrative. This film version "barely presents such instances" of objectifying and sexualising women compared to its predecessors (Belle et al., 2023). For instance, while the male gaze is not entirely eradicated, manifesting subtly in some training scenes, the film demonstrates a conscious effort to move towards a more substantive empowerment by focusing on teamwork and skill rather than aesthetic display. Despite its progressive aims, the film grapples with subtle re-inscriptions of traditional gender expectations due to the inherent

visual conventions of mainstream cinema (Gransden, 2024; Sachar, 2024). The 2019 film, for example, has been noted to potentially present a "male gaze directed at a female audience," where success and empowerment are internalized as measures of worth for its female protagonists. These observations highlight the pervasive nature of the male gaze in popular cinema, even in productions such as *Charlie's Angels* that explicitly aim to challenge gender norms and celebrate female strength (Belle et al., 2023).



picture 3
Female Agency in the *Charlie's Angels* 2019 film version

The analysis demonstrates that while the films present empowering narratives of female protagonists, they often simultaneously reproduce elements of the male gaze through visual framing and narrative conventions. This phenomenon reflects the ongoing academic discourse surrounding post-feminist media landscapes, where discussions of gender equality coexist with the subtle re-inscription of traditional gender roles, often presented under the guise of female choice or agency (Oliver 2017; Sachar 2024). The differing directorial and narrative approaches across the 2000, 2003, and 2019 versions reveal a continuous negotiation between the depiction of female agency and adherence to established visual pleasure paradigms. Earlier films, such as the 2000 and 2003 versions, with their opening scenes featuring Angels in tight swimsuits exemplify how female characters, despite their strength, can be framed as objects of spectacle. This suggests that "empowerment" in these instances can be an "artificial" visual packaging oriented towards masculine tastes.

While the 2019 film shows a more conscious effort to depart from conventional male gaze structures, the challenge of fully escaping these entrenched viewing conventions remains, as evidenced by the lingering subtle male gaze, even in training scenes. This underscores the enduring relevance of Laura Mulvey's foundational work on the male gaze, even as subsequent scholarship has expanded to consider nuances such as female spectatorship and the potential for subversion (Belle et al., 2023; Chen, 2024). The *Charlie's Angels* films serve as a compelling case study of this complex interplay, illustrating how mainstream cinema can both empower and inadvertently objectify female characters. This continuous negotiation between depicting

female agency and adhering to established visual pleasure paradigms underscores the ongoing relevance of critical discourse analysis in understanding gender narratives in popular culture. The evolution across the films, from overt objectification in earlier films to attempts at reorienting the gaze in the 2019 version, reflects a broader shift in the media's engagement with feminist critiques, even as the structural biases of the film industry persist.

CONCLUSION

Despite these efforts, the persistence of certain visual notions and narrative structures demonstrates the deeply embedded nature of patriarchal viewing conventions within the film industry. This continuous negotiation between depicting female agency and adhering to established visual pleasure paradigms underscores the ongoing relevance of critical discourse analysis in understanding gender narratives within popular culture. Future research could expand this analysis to include a broader range of action films featuring female protagonists and investigate whether similar patterns of paradoxically empowered yet objectified portrayals are common across the genre. Additionally, examining audience reception and critical reviews can provide further insights into how these portrayals are interpreted. Furthermore, comparative studies examining the cinematic portrayal of female characters in different cultural contexts could illuminate how the male gaze manifests differently across global media landscapes.

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