Shedding Light on Fashion Industry: An Analysis of "The Devil Wears Prada"

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Abstract: This essay delves into the complexities of the fashion industry as portrayed in the movie *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), directed by David Frankel. Through analyzing power dynamics, the gaze, and societal pressures, the essay explores the journey of Andy Sachs, an aspiring journalist navigating the world of fashion journalism under the formidable editor-in-chief, Miranda Priestly. Theoretical frameworks, including Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze," Michel Foucault's power theory, and Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital, enrich the understanding of the film's themes. "The Devil Wears Prada" offers a critical examination of the fashion industry's glamorous facade and its impact on individuals, prompting discussions about societal values and body positivity. While acknowledging the film's limitations as fictional, the essay highlights the fashion industry's evolving commitment to inclusivity, particularly in expanding clothes sizes. Ultimately, the movie serves as a timeless reference point for discussions on ambition and authenticity amidst societal pressures in the fashion world.

Keywords: Gaze, Gender and Power, Fashion Industry

1.   Introduction

The movie *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), directed by David Frankel and based on Lauren Weisberger's novel, delves into the fashion industry's complexities through the journey of Andy Sachs (played by Anne Hathaway). The film revolves around Andy's evolution from an aspiring journalist to a figure in fashion journalism. Miranda Priestly, the head editor of Runway magazine, personifies the industry's unrelenting standards and demands [1]. Streep's portrayal underscores the high stakes and moral dilemmas that come with success in such a cutthroat environment. The narrative culminates in Andy's decision to break away from Runway, symbolizing her commitment to preserving her integrity in an industry that often requires compromises. As she navigates the complexities of this elite industry, her journey reflects the balancing act between ambition and authenticity, ultimately prompting her to reevaluate her aspirations and redefine her path.

Despite extensive exploration by numerous researchers into the connections between 'The Devil Wears Prada' and everyday phenomena, such as gendered language differences and consumer behavior associated with luxury goods, a notable gap exists in analyzing power dynamics and the female gaze within the fashion industry. These aspects are crucial for a comprehensive feminist examination. Therefore, this essay's contention will center on how Frankel employs a range of filming techniques to establish a profound connection between theories and the intricate tapestry of his movie.

Specifically, this paper aims to elucidate how these techniques illuminate the societal pressures imposed on women to conform to established roles while striving for empowerment and acknowledgement of their distinctive talents and aspirations. Furthermore, this examination will unveil the interplay between notions of gender and power intricately linked to Mulvey's theory of the gaze.

2.   Theoretical Framework & key definitions

Gaze, as depicted in the movie, is influenced by Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" in feminist film theory. Introduced in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," the male gaze refers to cinema's framing through a heterosexual male perspective, shaping both camera angles and narrative structure. This concept impacts how women are portrayed in films and how audiences engage with these depictions. In response to Mulvey's ideas, the term "female gaze" in the movie challenges the notion that all viewers must identify with the male protagonist and adopt a controlling male gaze. It allows women to embrace an active and objectifying gaze traditionally linked to males, challenging cultural gender stereotypes. Importantly, the objects of this gaze need not be limited to males.

2.1.   Applying Michel Foucault's power theory

Gender and power dynamics are also emphasized and evolve throughout the movie. Gender dynamics pertain to the ways in which people interact and relate to each other, influenced by their gender identities [2]. This movie perfectly demonstrates and supports the power theory of Michel Foucault, which he describes the exercise of power as a process by which particular actions alter the behaviors of others. It forms a comprehensive system of actions directed towards potential behaviors, with the exercise of power involving the guidance of conduct possibilities and the organization of potential outcomes [3]. In the context of the film, Miranda Priestly, as the powerful and demanding editor, constantly modifies and shapes Andy's actions. She assigns tasks, sets expectations, and dictates how things should be done, effectively controlling Andy's behavior within the workplace. The power dynamic in the fashion industry, as depicted in the film, constitutes a total structure of actions. However, Miranda's authority and influence extend beyond individual interactions; they permeate the entire fashion world depicted in the movie.

Moreover, the movie also proves "panopticism", asserted by Foucault, that knowing a certain individual or group means exercising power over those people. The Panopticon concept is exemplified when individuals willingly agree to employment contracts, obliging them to carry out their employer's directives during their work hours [4]. In the movie, Miranda serves as a prime exemplification of these panoptic principles due to her constant surveillance within the workplace, where employees are acutely aware of her watchful eye and evaluative gaze. Her physical and symbolic presence looms, and her opinions wield tremendous influence. This awareness of being observed significantly shapes how employees behave and execute their tasks. Moreover, the concept of internalized control, central to panopticism, becomes apparent as Miranda's staff, including Andy, voluntarily modify their actions and choices to align with what they perceive as Miranda's desires, even in her absence. It is as if Miranda's power extends beyond her physical presence, and employees carry the weight of her expectations with them at all times.

2.2.   Fashion Industry

Within the distinct backdrop of the fashion industry, the director skillfully incorporates Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital throughout the movie. This framework proves invaluable for comprehending the nuances of the fashion world depicted in the film. Cultural capital encompasses

the array of symbolic components, including skills, preferences, body language, attire, behaviors, possessions, and qualifications, that individuals gain by belonging to a specific social class [5]. Miranda's extensive knowledge of fashion, impeccable sense of style, and understanding of the cultural and social dimensions of the fashion world are evident. Her capacity to discern what holds fashion appeal and desirability within the industry underscores her possession of cultural capital.

3. Analysis

3.1. Connection between gaze and the protagonist

In the film, the theme of gaze is woven into the characters of Andy and Miranda, offering a compelling exploration of how the fashion industry's relentless scrutiny affects both the observed and the observer. Andy, the protagonist, constantly finds herself under the critical gaze of her colleagues, who dissect her appearance and attire. This scrutiny reflects the industry's demand for conformity, which molds her into a mere byproduct of the fashion world. Andy's vulnerability in the fashion industry forces her to struggle because every sartorial choice she makes is judged and evaluated. This relationship of being gazed at and introspecting serves as a poignant commentary on the industry's power to subjugate individuals, pressuring them into conforming to its ideals.

In stark contrast, Miranda, the formidable editor of the fashion empire, holds the reins of judgment and power within the industry. Her exacting demands and critical eye symbolize the relentless pursuit of perfection that defines the fashion world. This meticulous portrayal of her authority becomes evident through her aloof facial expressions and piercing eye contact with both the characters within the film and the audience watching it. However, paradoxically, Miranda remains ensnared in the unforgiving scrutiny of the fashion world. Her every action is subjected to intense examination, frequently emulated, and notably amplified. This unrelenting scrutiny is particularly evident in meticulously crafted fashion runway scenes, where Miranda confidently strides amidst a sea of enraptured onlookers. The deliberate depiction of Miranda as the central figure in these moments serves to underscore the profound magnification of her actions and decisions, highlighting her influential role. However, this power comes at a price, as her actions and choices are held as the pinnacle of style and authority, allowing her minimal space to unveil her own vulnerabilities. Consequently, the film illuminates that, in the realm of high fashion, the gaze operates as a double-edged sword, imposing immense pressure not only on those who are observed but also on those who occupy the role of the observer.

3.2. Power Dynamics between the two heroines

The power dynamics between Miranda and Andy experience a profound transformation that mirrors their personal voyage of self-discovery and determination. Initially, Miranda wields an unwavering grip on power within the high-stakes realm of fashion journalism. As the iconic editor of Runway magazine, her decrees are considered gospel, and her presence exudes an undeniable air of dominance. In stark contrast, Andy steps into this world as an enthusiastic yet unseasoned assistant. She epitomizes the archetypal outsider, grappling with the fashion industry's myriad constraints and relentless demands. This glaring power asymmetry serves as a vivid illustration of the hierarchical framework that underpins the fashion world, with Miranda reigning supreme as the undisputed queen while Andy occupies the role of a subordinate. However, as the film's narrative unfolds, a discernible shift in power dynamics comes to the fore. Andy embarks on a journey guided by her heart and principles in which she shed the constraints this job has brought her. She comes to the profound realization that her path is not solely about acquiescing to external expectations but rather a quest to unearth her authentic self. This transformation, in turn, challenges Miranda's dominion over Andy, as the latter no longer seeks validation from the former. Andy's evolution symbolizes a departure from

the industry's stifling grip, which signifies that one can break free from the shackles of conformity and pursue a more authentic path.

3.2.1. Background setting

The fashion industry is, in reality, a harsh and unforgiving realm, marked by its stifling standards for individuals. The setting of this film flawlessly captures the unvarnished truth of this industry. In a piece titled Top Model Candid about Body Shaming Prevalent in Fashion," which chronicles a model's firsthand experience with an eating disorder, Karen Elson, a renowned British model of the mid-90s who graced the catwalks for esteemed fashion houses such as Marc Jacobs, Jean-Paul Gaultier, Chanel and adorned the covers of prestigious international magazines, voiced a powerful message during her inaugural Model Mentor Zoom event—— "Being hungry should not be a sign of success,". At this event, she engaged in candid discussions alongside both seasoned and aspiring models, casting agents, and legal experts, shedding light on the pervasive issues of body shaming and psychological abuse within the fashion industry [6]. Elson's poignant statement emphasized that hunger should not be equated with success in this industry. Based on the findings from an experiment investigating the prevalence of disordered eating habits among fashion models, the result shows Fashion models have a high risk of developing disordered eating habits [7]. In fact, the movie realistically and vividly shows the plight and the darkness of the fashion industry in this modern era.

3.2.2. Dissecting the movie —— Bright and Blight

Moreover, the movie uses advanced film techniques to contrast the glamour and the harsh realities of the fashion industry.   The movie begins with a series of shots featuring high-end fashion items, such as designer shoes, bags, and accessories. Also, the dialogue constantly repeats the phrase, "This is a job that all girls want". All these detailed portrayals emphasize the luxury and opulence of the fashion industry. However, the director skillfully exposes the industry's dark side as the narrative unfolds. A pivotal moment sees Andy's colleague, Selina, restricted to a meager cube of cheese, symbolizing the industry's relentless demands and the extreme measures taken to maintain a certain image. This contrast between surface allure and underlying struggles effectively encapsulates the dichotomy of the fashion world.

4. Influence of the movie and the development of the fashion industry in reality

The movie offers a compelling critique of the fashion industry by peeling back the glamorous façade and delving into its less savory aspects. Through the character of Miranda Priestly, the film exposes the industry's ruthless competitiveness, where demanding work environments and unrealistic expectations are the norm. The movie does not shy away from portraying the fashion world's fixation on superficiality and the relentless pressure it places on individuals to conform to narrow beauty standards. It also raises questions about the exploitation that can occur within the industry, particularly the demanding relationship between fashion designers and their assistants. Furthermore, the movie delves into the moral quandaries encountered by the main character, Andy Sachs, as she navigates the industry, underscoring the conflict between personal ethics and career achievement.

In terms of its influence on society, "The Devil Wears Prada" has been a catalyst for discussions about the hidden complexities of the fashion industry. It has prompted viewers to reflect critically on societal values, consumerism, and the pursuit of success, even when it comes at a significant personal cost. The movie has also inspired many individuals to consider careers in fashion journalism, as it provides an intriguing glimpse into the industry's inner workings. Furthermore, it has played a role in reshaping public perceptions of the fashion world, offering a more balanced portrayal that goes beyond the glitz and glamour to reveal the sacrifices often demanded behind the scenes.

Nowadays, the fashion industry has become a more inclusive space where all kinds of beauties are accepted. There's been a growing body positivity movement on social media platforms, which actively contests the appearance ideals propagated by the media [8]. This movement promotes greater representation and normalization of diverse individuals [9], along with fostering inclusivity, self-acceptance, and self-love. Moreover, in recent years, the fashion industry has undergone a significant transformation, exemplifying its commitment to inclusivity through the expansion of available clothes sizes. Historically, the industry has been critiqued for its narrow focus on a limited range of body types, perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards and leaving many individuals feeling excluded [10]. However, the shift towards offering a broader spectrum of sizes in fashion collections represents a noteworthy stride in promoting inclusivity. This transformation acknowledges the diversity of body shapes and sizes and is a pivotal step in reshaping societal perceptions of beauty. The effects of this inclusivity are multi-faceted, encompassing representation, consumer diversity, financial gains for brands, enhanced brand image, and legal compliance, all of which contribute to a more inclusive and socially responsible fashion landscape. While these developments signify progress, it is essential to emphasize that true inclusivity extends beyond mere size options and should encompass thoughtful design, marketing strategies, and genuine representation of diverse bodies in the fashion industry. Therefore, incorporating a diverse range of clothing sizes stands as a crucial element in the fashion industry's dedication to advancing inclusivity, creating a more accessible and embracing space for individuals, regardless of their body shape.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, "The Devil Wears Prada" profoundly explores the fashion industry's complexities, shedding light on power dynamics, the gaze, and societal pressures. Through the characters of Andy and Miranda, the film underscores the challenges of navigating an industry that demands conformity while also emphasizing personal growth and authenticity. Theoretical frameworks such as Laura Mulvey's gaze theory, Michel Foucault's power dynamics, and Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital have enriched our understanding of the fashion world's intricacies as portrayed in the film.

While the film provides meaningful insights into the fashion industry, it is essential to recognize its limitations as a fictionalized portrayal. The film simplifies certain aspects for dramatic effect and may not fully capture the nuanced reality of the fashion world. Nevertheless, it serves as a catalyst for important discussions about power dynamics, the gaze, and societal pressures within the industry. Looking to the future, the fashion industry has made strides toward inclusivity and body positivity, signaling a positive evolution. The expansion of clothing sizes and a greater emphasis on diversity are steps in the right direction, promoting a more accessible and accepting fashion landscape.

As the fashion industry continues to adapt to changing cultural norms and consumer expectations, "The Devil Wears Prada" will remain a timeless reference for examining the tension between ambition and authenticity in a world where success often comes at a price. It encourages viewers to critically reflect on their own values and aspirations within the fashion realm, sparking important conversations about the industry's impact on individuals and society as a whole.

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