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## 20 Great Movies That Subvert The Male Gaze

These films put women front and center, showcasing them as complete individuals with complex emotions.

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For several decades, movies have objectified women and portrayed them as mere pawns in a story. Their sole purpose has been to appeal to the male gaze. Women are sidelined, with their personal achievements and significance often taking a backseat. But that's not the case with every movie. There are films that challenge the norms and subvert the male-centric view. These films put women front and center, showcasing them as complete individuals with complex emotions.

Like us mortals, these films have also strived for a refreshing change of perspective. And when succeeded, they have delivered the most compelling stories. From digging deep into their subconscious to testing their resilience and wit, these films feature a female protagonist shaped by flaws and desires rather than one motivated solely by romance. So, without much ado, let's celebrate 20 exceptional movies that not only subvert the traditional male gaze but also revolutionize the way women are represented on screen.

## 20 Marie Antoinette (2006)



Written and directed by the very incredible Sofia Coppola, **Marie Antoinette** is the perfect film to begin this list with. is set against the lavish backdrop of Versailles in the 1770, when teenage Marie Antoinette got betrothed and married to Louis XVI and eventually became the ill-fated queen of France. The events are told with a light sensitivity and with humor rather than a strong, tragic tone.

Kirsten Dunst portrays the young Austrian archduchess who doesn't even flinch upon being thrust into the glitz of the French court. But perhaps the most accurate portrayal of a woman navigating her place and purpose in a world dictated by ridiculous rules was done using visuals of beautiful shoes and dresses and when the queen is spending time with her daughter, the world shut out.

## 19 **Clueless (1995)**



**Clueless** not only revamps Jane Austen's Emma with its modern twist, but also creates a hilarious, female-oriented, high school comedy that is quoted even decades after its release. The film centers on popular but shallow teen Cher Horowitz, who may seem like a mean girl but is actually quite kind and resourceful. When Tai joins high school, Cher spins around in delight and takes her matchmaking valley girl skills to a brand new level to help elevate her social status.

Played by Alicia Silverstone, Cher is often seen as an oblivious, privileged teen of Beverly Hills. But little notice that she models true friendship with her little actions. The film also focuses on her self-growth and updates it for a new generation.

## 18 Fish Tank (2009)





An independent film written and directed by Andrea Arnold, ***Fish Tank*** centers around 15-year-old Mia, who is rebellious and unpredictable. Her mother, Joanne, isn't the best person to rely on either and her younger sister hangs out with the wrong crowd. When Mia starts getting close to Conner, her mother's boyfriend, he encourages her to escape the troubled home life through her passion for dance.

At one point, both Joanne and Mia are competing for Connor's affection. The BAFTA-winning film is realistic in the sense that it shows Mia as a teenager who is not shaped by any traditional male influences in her life. But instead, she is trying to navigate the world with the help of what she has. Arnold avoids using old clichés about dysfunctional families and tells Mia's story with brutal honesty.

## 17 Four Adventures of Reinette and Mirabelle (1987)



Let's just say that Éric Rohmer is an exception when it comes to capturing the female gaze despite being a man. And it is proved in this witty French comedy about two teenage girls in the 1960s. The main titular characters of ***Four Adventures of Reinette and Mirabelle*** are the heart of the movie. They could not be more different – one is poised and proper, the other outspoken and impulsive. However, as allies, these girls share something so feminine and tender.

Told in four sketches, the film follows them on four adventures as they break free from the sheltered world of school to the thrills of outside. Male archetypes always portray women as the good girl or the bad girl, but because there is a lot of improvisation in this film, we see a multifaceted view of women, where they are curious and intelligent, they love to experiment but would be cautious, where they're funny and also thoughtful.

## 16 Girlhood (2014)



Another brilliant French drama, ***Girlhood*** is directed by Céline Sciamma, who is a master of modern filmmaking. Raw and gritty, the movie follows Marieme, a young Black girl growing up in a difficult neighborhood. Marieme isn't good at academics and her turbulent family life doesn't help the cause. She finds her place among a rough crew of girls from the projects and starts dealing drugs to groups of older men. These girls, all discriminated against and neglected, form a family of their own on the dimly-lit streets of Paris.

While the powerful performance from newcomer Karidja Touré is worth a loud applause, the film also features an entirely Black cast to give more focus to how women of color are often overlooked by society. Sciamma uses a female gaze and injects her protagonists with warmth and wisdom.

## 15 Daisies (1966)





With a runtime of only 75 minutes, ***Daisies*** reveals the absolute madness of societies that wish to control the lives of women as they grow up. The film was a grand entry from the Czech New Wave movement, and is a audacious comedy that follows the pranks and misadventures of two teenage girls, both named Marie, who decide to become spoiled because the world is spoiled as well. They re clearly tired of the rules and restrictions imposed on them, but now they choose chaos and with glee, destroy the patriarchy around them.

There are mass food fights, outrageous mocking of men, critiquing the male gaze, and swinging from chandeliers. Marie and Marie are delightful as they upend every aspect of the society that was created by the men and for the men. Overall, the film takes a simple teen movie trope and turns it into a vibrant feminist statement with humor and physical gags.

#### 14 Fat Girl (2001)





If you think Bo Burnham's *Eighth Grade* represents teen angst and the struggle for self-acceptance accurately, you definitely need to check out ***Fat Girl***. Haunting and unapologetic, it follows Anaïs, a twelve-year-old girl who feels like she has the weight of the world on her little shoulders. But she lives under the shadow of her fifteen-year-old sister Elena, who is reluctantly entering womanhood.

Where Anaïs is both wise and stupid, Elena is no better because she doesn't realize that she's an object of male desire. The French drama is truly uncompromising in its portrayal of teenage sexuality and the exploration that comes with growing up. Despite being considered as controversial upon its release, the film won multiple awards for being bold and confronting society's obsession with female bodies.

### 13 The Watermelon Woman (1996)



Although the 1990s were too late a time for this achievement, but ***The Watermelon Woman*** was the first ever feature film to be written, directed, and released by a Black lesbian. The movie is a semi-autobiographical comedy and it follows Cheryl Dunye herself playing a young filmmaker trying to make her first film. Her premise? An unknown 1940s actress known as the Watermelon Woman, who was always cast as a mammy.

The project plays out in two different styles: one as a narrative where Dunye meets a woman at a video store and strikes conversation with her, and the other where Dunye records herself in 1990s Philadelphia, with a camcorder, talking about race, gender, and sexuality. The film is as humorous as it is insightful. But more than anything, it represents an important puzzle piece in the history of cinema where a Black queer woman is pushing past the norm to be more visible.

## 12 Cleo from 5 to 7 (1963)



In the spirit of experimentation, this French New Wave drama revolves around the famous pop singer Cléo Victoire, who is waiting anxiously for the results of her biopsy test. She has two hours to kill and a mountain of worry to hold. So she decides to just go out in the city and distract herself. ***Cleo from 5 to 7*** is directed by Agnès Varda, and is considered one of her best works ever. It features a moody score and a dreamy pace, which is an appropriate representation of Cléo's wandering thoughts and her fear. After all, Cléo is a complex woman.

Being a public figure, she has been objectified and that has torn her perception of womanhood. She has philosophical beliefs but she's also actively in touch with her desires. Which, in the film, are evoked when she meets a soldier. Varda rejects the male gaze

## 11 Dance, Girl, Dance (1940)





Maureen O'Hara and Lucille Ball star as two competitive and aspiring ballerinas in ***Dance, Girl, Dance***. The intriguing film from the forties charts the lives of the remarkably talented Judy O'Brien, who must face a budding rival, a burlesque queen who goes by the name Bubbles. The path for success for these women is a grueling one and it doesn't help that they're also vying for the attention of the same man.

But under Dorothy Arzner's piercing gaze, this movie subverts Hollywood ideals like how women should be feminine and delicate and easy to break by presenting the sheer ruthlessness and exploitation that the industry demands from them. Moreover, Maureen O'Hara's character, in one instance, breaks the fourth wall and calls out men and their bad habits by saying, "Go ahead and stare."

## 10 Lions Love (1969)



Agnès Varda has always been fond of challenging the male gaze. It was evident in her work as a photographer and later, when she began directing. Her entire filmography is filled with projects that understand the perspective of the person behind the camera versus the person viewing the art on screen. This tension is intense, and *Lions Love (... and Lies)* explores the dynamic quite boldly. It follows Viva, Jim, and Jerry, who are three spiritually linked actors living together in a rented house in Los Angeles.

They witness the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, as displayed on TV and have their own reactions to the incident. On the other hand, Shirley Clarke plays herself in the film, visiting Hollywood to make a film on actors. The catch here, however, is when Varda shoots Clarke in one scene and Clarke breaks the fourth wall with, I just can't do this Agnès, which shows a gendered hierarchy present while filming.

## 9 Illusions (1982)



From the mind of an internationally acclaimed African American director, this short film is basically a pioneering one in challenging how Black females were perceived in classic films. Thought-provoking and honest, the drama centers around Mignon Dupree, an African American studio executive who passes as a white woman to build a career and rise up the ranks. Dupree's job is to assimilate the sound portions of a film with its visuals, and in doing so she stumbles upon a Black voice artist dubbing for a light-skinned actress.

She realizes just how neglected the talents of those like her have remained along with the fear of being outed herself. Set against the backdrop of 1940s Hollywood, the film exposes the structure of the industry and shows how it is a purely white world, making the title *Illusions* an appropriate sum.

## 8 Phantom Love (2007)

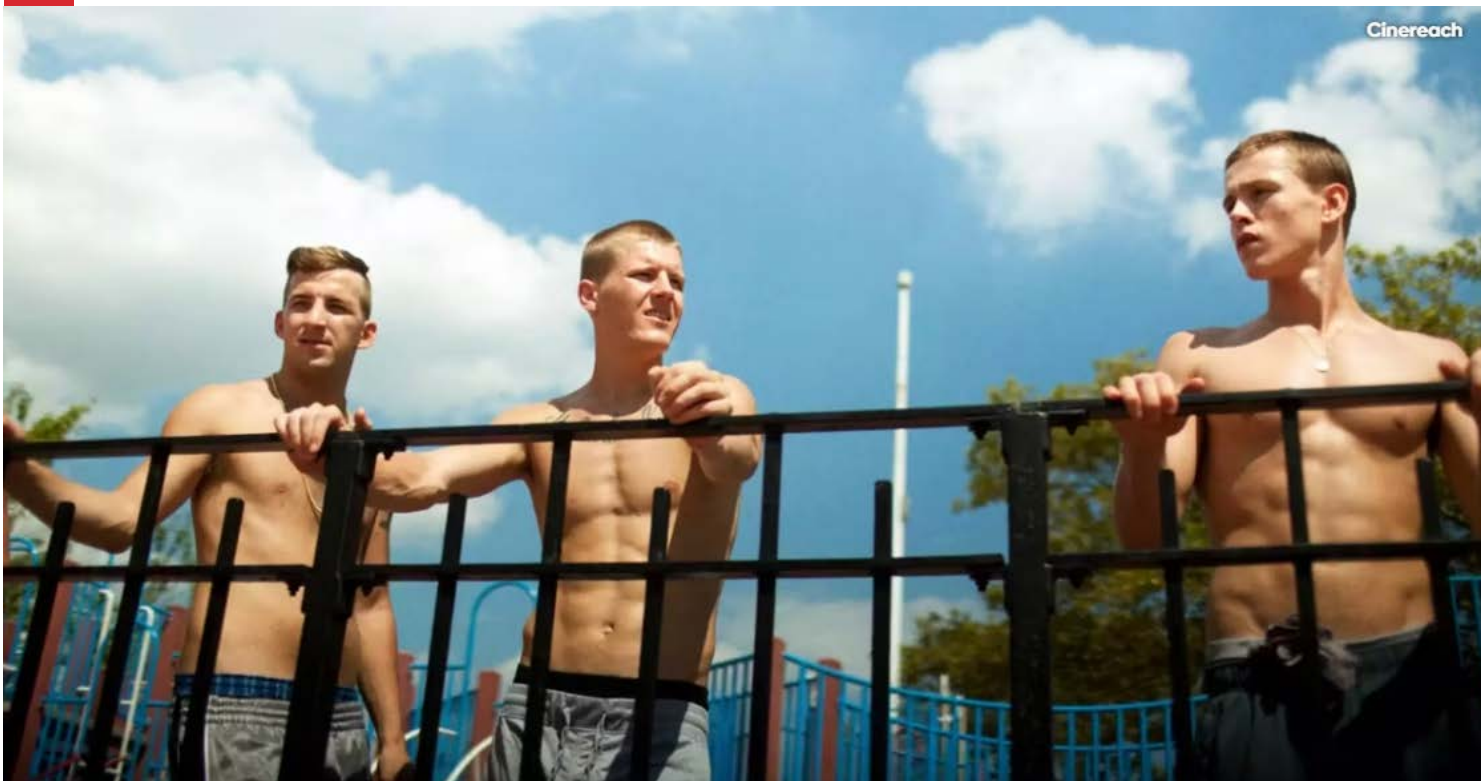




By now, it is pretty clear that the entire weight of subverting the male gaze lies on the director's shoulders. This 2007 film by Nina Menkes is the perfect example of how a filmmaker can place you inside the mind and body of their protagonist without so much as batting an eye. Lulu, played by Marina Shoif, is our main protagonist. She lives in Koreatown, Los Angeles, with her family and yearns to liberate herself. ***Phantom Love*** features Shoif in a series of sexual entanglements as she navigates a society that offers women only few options for a future.

The greatest achievement of the film is Menkes' narrative and her visuals. Like when she's shooting a sex scene, she uses metaphors like a slithering snake or a blurred face to let the viewer understand what Lulu is experiencing. Menkes makes you think, sparks your intuition, and fires up your feelings.

## 7 Beach Rats (2017)



***Beach Rats*** is a recent coming-of-age queer drama that follows Frankie, a troubled teenage boy in Brooklyn trying to come to terms with his sexuality while also exploring his forbidden attraction to men in an age when the society frowned upon same-sex relationships. Even though the film focuses all its attention on a male protagonist, with the direction of Eliza Hittman and a brilliant cinematography by H  l  ne Louvart, the film subverts the male gaze by amplifying just how a masculine identity is projected on gay men.

Harris Dickinson plays Frankie, a closeted teen stuck with an overbearing mother and putting on a facade by having female friends and lovers at the same time. Both Hittman and Louvart are responsible for making this portrait subtle and profound.

## 6 Lingua Franca (2019)



As we move closer to the current decade, the representation of the queer community on screen and the question of inclusivity becomes more prominent. This shift in perspective allows the new generation to throw the male gaze out of the window and explore the potential of cinema to bring change. Directed by Isabel Sandoval, *Lingua Franca* is a moving drama about a transgender woman named Filipina Olivia, who sets out to America for a new start. She secures a job as a caregiver, but complications arise when she falls in love with an elderly woman's grandson.

The movie topples the cisnormative method of storytelling long practiced in the industry by presenting us with a trans woman finding herself at the intersection of womanhood, immigration, and desire. Sandoval herself plays Olivia, which is fitting because her performance is truly affecting.

## 5 Frances Ha (2015)





How can a list about challenging the male gaze be complete without mentioning Greta Gerwig? Co-created with Noah Baumbach, ***Frances Ha*** is an indie comedy that follows 27-year-old Frances, played by Gerwig herself. Frances is an aspiring dancer struggling with uncertainty and delayed ambition in modern-day New York City. She lives with Sophie, her best friend from dance school and when Sophie decides to move in with her boyfriend, Frances is left without an apartment.

The movie weakens the overused coming-of-age tropes by showing a phase of life that isn't fully realized in film—the young-adult limbo. Despite moving at a slow pace without any consequential change, Frances' arc is all about the trials of finding stability and reveling in the joy of female friendships. Gerwig's monologue about looking across the room and landing eyes on your person really stands out in showcasing the grace with which women love.

#### 4 The Handmaiden (2016)



Directed by Park Chan-wook, ***The Handmaiden*** is an erotic thriller set in 1930s Korea. It stars Kim Min-hee and Kim Tae-ri in one of their best movie performances. The story is hauntingly beautiful, centered around a Japanese woman who appoints a handmaiden, unaware of the intricate con plotted by her and a con man to rob her of her wealth. The reason this psychological film makes the list is that it goes beyond the Hitchcockian tropes by combining a politically charged story with a sprawling lesbian romance.

The movie thrives in its female experiences, with both the stars showing and suppressing their desire and power in a world where men dominate the system. It rejects the notion that women are simply objects. Lady Hideko and her handmaiden, Sook-hee, are both multifaceted — sometimes moral, sometimes amoral — and that's what makes them radical.

### 3 Lady Bird (2017)



The movie isn't your usual girl-meets-boy teen drama, so throw your expectations away. Instead, it centers around the emotional journey of its protagonist, her relationship with her loving and opinionated mother, her muted longings and growing pains, and the secret joys that shape her entire experience of adolescence. All the female characters in the movie are rich and developed, and they refuse to be simple.

## 2 Orlando (1992)





Loosely based on Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel, ***Orlando*** is an unusual and whimsical period drama set in the 16th century and it follows an English nobleman played by Tilda Swinton, living in his parents' house that he recently inherited. After many trials and tribulations, Orlando finds peace in Constantinople, where he practices his art. But his life is far from peaceful because he wakes up one morning, mysteriously changed into a woman and having to fight for his own property back home.

Director Sally Potter takes a timeless story and allows it to subvert gender binaries with a title character who questions gender and class from the opening scene itself. Being set in a historical era allows for some perks too. But overall, *Orlando* rejects the male gaze with an unwavering feminine perspective that is open, inquisitive, accepting, and healthy.

## 1 Portrait of a Lady on Fire (2019)





Even if you haven't heard of *Girlhood* (a movie mentioned earlier on the list), chances are that you have marveled at the sheer beauty of this lush French romance which is also directed by Céline Sciamma. ***Portrait of a Lady on Fire*** follows a female painter named Marianne, who is tasked with painting a wedding portrait of Héloïse, a stunning young noblewoman. Set on an isolated island in late 18th century Brittany, the film plays out in two directions — emotional and erotic.

As the portrait progresses, we witness an intense forbidden love affair between the two women. In a way, the few days they spend together are also their personal awakenings because the leads are still exploring what it feels like to be loved. Sciamma is already a master of crafting the feminine vision and the electricity between two women seeing and truly knowing each other.

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An avid cinephile and self-proclaimed cat lady, Soniya adores watching films that move and transform and broaden her perspective. When she isn't busy working, you'll find her immersed in an arthouse film, catching up on stand up specials, discovering new music, gazing at the moon, and earning quality time to ponder it all.