
The Reversal of the Gaze: Visual Power and Counter-disciplinary Practices of Maternal Subjectivity in *All Her Fault*

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Abstract: The American TV Series *All Her Fault* takes the case of a missing child as the narrative core, and constructs a game of visual power through the struggle and resistance of Marissa Irvine, the mother protagonist, in extreme difficulties. This article takes Foucault's theory of power gaze and feminist motherhood research as theoretical frameworks, combined with the details of the drama text, to explore how the disciplinary gaze of patriarchal society towards motherhood operates through visual mechanisms, analyze how Marissa transforms from a "guilty mother" being gazed upon to an active seeker of truth, and reveal the anti-disciplinary power contained in her visual practice. Research has found that the series achieves a reversal of the visual power of motherhood through the use of metaphors in camera language and the design of the visual behavior of characters. It not only criticizes the social norms that overly blame women for family accidents, but also provides new narrative possibilities for the self-empowerment of motherhood.

Keywords: *All Her Fault*; Maternal subject; Visual power; Gaze; Counter-disciplinary practices

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1. Maternal discipline under the gaze of patriarchy: Visual mechanisms and power operations

In the patriarchal social structure, motherhood is always within a strict disciplinary system, and visual gaze is the core mechanism that enables this system to operate. Foucault pointed out in his discourse on the operation of power that gaze, as an intangible technique of power, can achieve control and discipline over the subject through the pressure of being seen, making the subject consciously accept established social norms^[1]. At the beginning of *All Her Fault*, this disciplinary gaze field is constructed through the language of the camera, placing Marissa on the visual judgment bench of an "unqualified mother." After his son Milo went missing, whether it was the police investigation, media reports, or public opinion discussions, they all focused their scrutiny on Marissa through visual means, forming a comprehensive gaze network.

In the police investigation scene, Detective Alcaraz's gaze has a typical power attribute. The series repeatedly uses close-up shots to capture close-ups of the detective's eyes, with their sharp gaze directed directly at Marissa. The detective

repeatedly asks Marissa questions such as “What did she do before picking up the child?” and “Why didn’t she confirm the address in advance?”, essentially forcing her to accept the disciplinary logic that the mother should take full responsibility for the safety of the child through visual and linguistic pressure. This kind of gaze is not simply a personal behavior, but a concrete manifestation of the patriarchal social power structure. As a representative of state power, the detective’s gaze is based on the rigid expectations of the entire society for motherhood—mothers must be omniscient and vigilant guardian angels. Once a child encounters an accident, the mother is the primary responsible person.

The visual presentation of the media further reinforces this disciplinary gaze. The series symbolically portrays Marissa’s image through television news, newspaper headlines, and other visual elements: messy hair, haggard face, and flickering eyes are repeatedly magnified. These visual elements together construct an image of a negligent mother, satisfying society’s imagination of the culprit. The media deliberately avoided the absence of Peter, the father, in their reports, but continued to focus on Marissa’s emotional outburst and inappropriate behavior. This selective visual presentation is essentially a manifestation of gender power inequality under patriarchy. As feminist scholar Mulvey has pointed out, “Male gaze objectifies women as objects of observation, making them passive parties in power relations”^[2]. Under the gaze of the media, Marissa gradually loses her subjectivity and becomes the “other” who is judged and criticized.

The series delves deeper into the criticism of media scrutiny. When Peter spoke at the press conference, the reporter did not ask him any questions. However, when Marissa pleaded with society to help find her child, the camera suddenly switched to reporters questioning Marissa in turn, throwing a series of sharp questions at her: “Why did you allow someone else’s nanny to pick up your child?”, “Where were you when the child was taken away?” Through this selective questioning, the media unconsciously replaced “parenting is the responsibility of both parties” with “the mother is a full-time guardian.” When the mother collapses in front of the camera, they are not showing the pain of a victim, but being edited into a guilty expression. And what about dad? He does not even have the qualification to be questioned—this “privilege of not being scrutinized” is precisely the greatest injustice. The media accused them of planning the entire disappearance case in order to earn traffic due to their connection with the publishing house. This out-of-context report is aimed at the mother in all aspects, and all attacks are directed at her. What is even more ironic is that the media uses a photo of Marissa and Milo in their reports to symbolize motherly love, but also denounces her for not fulfilling her duties as a mother through a voice-over. This visual and linguistic contradiction precisely exposes the patriarchal double standard of motherhood—requiring women to selflessly dedicate themselves while also taking responsibility for all accidents^[3].

The gaze within the family also constitutes an important dimension of discipline. Her husband Peter’s gaze was mixed with anxiety, doubt, and blame. When Marissa raised her doubts, Peter’s eyes were always full of distrust, even using words such as “Are you too nervous?”, “Maybe you forgot the address.” He even directly condemned her, “Why didn’t you check the phone number?” He linked his son’s disappearance to his mother’s unverified phone number. This gaze from an intimate relationship was even more lethal, as it directly attacked Marissa’s self-awareness and plunged her into self-doubt about whether it was my fault or not. In the patriarchal family structure, the husband, as the representative of rationality and calmness, is endowed with higher authority in his gaze, while the wife’s sensibility and intuition are seen as unreliable. This visual power inequality further consolidates the operation of maternal discipline.

In addition, the gaze of the general public is presented through visual scenes such as neighbors whispering and strangers pointing. During Marissa’s search for her child, she always felt strange looks from others wherever she went, which led to public suspicion that the entire child disappearance case was deliberately planned to gain traffic. These gazes are like invisible shackles, restricting her actions and expressions. This diffuse gaze forms a panoramic, open view disciplinary space, keeping Marissa constantly under surveillance and having to act in accordance with the socially expected image of a sad mother, suppressing her true emotions and doubts. Patriarchy internalizes the norms of motherhood as women’s self demands through this multi-level and all-round visual gaze, achieving control over the subject of motherhood.

2. The reversal of visual power: The gaze practice and self-empowerment of motherhood subjects

Faced with the disciplinary gaze of patriarchy, Marissa did not completely succumb. Instead, through a series of proactive visual practices, she completed the transformation of her identity from being gazed upon to being gazed upon, achieving a reversal of visual power. This reversal was not achieved overnight, but gradually unfolded with her exploration of the truth, reflecting the awakening and resistance of the motherhood subject in extreme difficulties.

Marissa's visual power is primarily reflected in questioning and deconstructing the constructed truth. When the outside world attributed Milo's disappearance to her negligence, she was not bound by this one-way narrative but firmly relied on her own visual memory and independent judgment. The series delicately captures her process of tracing back details through close-up shots: from the scene of picking up the child, to the interaction with the mother of the family committee, to the accidental mention of Milo's favorite cake in conversation with Jenny — these seemingly trivial visual memories gradually connect into key clues. She followed the cake clues to the nanny's shopping bill, exposing her lies and shifting the focus of the investigation to Carrie, pushing the truth exploration into a new track. During this process, the two women gradually pieced together the full picture of the event through their own observations and reasoning. Marissa was more keenly aware of the abnormal behavior of her husband, Peter, saw through his layers of lies, and finally learned the shocking truth that he changed the baby in the car accident on the day of the child's birth. After waiting for the right moment, she launched a calm and thorough counterattack, cleverly exploiting Peter's fatal weakness of food allergies to suffocate him to death. All of these actions are rooted in Marissa's continuous gaze and interpretation of details.

The camera repeatedly captures close-up shots of her gaze, interweaving anger, doubt, disappointment, grief, and determination - these gazes not only become her weapon to penetrate appearances and approach the truth, but also a profound resistance to the label of negligent mother imposed by patriarchal narratives. Through her own visual practice, Marissa broke the monopoly of a single power discourse and opened up a cognitive path belonging to women for reconstructing the truth.

Marissa's visual power is also reflected in her reverse gaze towards the patriarchal gaze. When her husband, Peter, painfully rebuked her for not verifying the phone number, Marissa's gaze shifted from initial sadness and self-blame to disgust and hatred. Through this reverse gaze, she rejected the patriarchal discipline represented by her husband. In addition, Marissa also guided the public's gaze through media lenses. She actively tries various ways to find her child. She is no longer a negligent mother who passively accepts interviews, but actively accepts media interviews, mobilizes public opinion to initiate activities to find her child, actively contacts the police and media, uses sincere eyes and words to impress the audience, and makes the public reflect on their prejudices and accusations before. This proactive use of media lenses has transformed Marissa from the object of judgment to the dominant narrator, successfully guiding the public's gaze and public opinion direction.

It is worth noting that Marissa's visual power reversal is not an isolated individual behavior, but is inseparable from Jenny's mutual gaze and support. Jenny, as a woman who has also experienced trauma, can understand Marissa's situation and feelings. Her gaze is not judgmental, but supportive. When Marissa began to lose trust in Peter, she expected Jenny to be by her side and support her more. She argued with Peter about this and said, "That's not something you can decide. I want Jenny here!" This statement was not only a choice for companionship, but also a public declaration of emotional sovereignty and the women's alliance ^[4]. This alliance breaks the competition and opposition between women under patriarchy, and through collective visual practice, jointly resists the oppression of the patriarchal gaze. As feminist scholar Hooks once said, "Women's unity and mutual assistance are important forces in resisting patriarchy" ^[5]. Marissa and Jenny's mutual gaze and support not only provide motivation for their own anti-disciplinary practices but also serve as an example for women's self-empowerment.

3. The social significance of anti-disciplinary training practice: The liberation of motherhood subject and narrative reconstruction

Marissa's visual power reversal not only achieves personal self-empowerment but also contains profound social significance. Her anti-disciplinary practice poses a powerful challenge to the patriarchal parenting discipline system, providing new possibilities for the liberation and narrative reconstruction of parenting subjects.

Firstly, patriarchal society shapes motherhood as a single, static ideal type through a sophisticated gaze mechanism and discourse system — the mother must be a completely selfless, forever sacrificing, and child-centered perfect embodiment. Any behavior deviating from this template will be quickly marked as a dereliction of duty or deviance and become the focus of social condemnation. This myth not only conceals the inherent complexity, contradictions, and resource inequality in parenting practices but also places mothers in an endless state of self-censorship and moral anxiety. *All Her Fault* deeply exposes the hypocrisy and oppressive nature of the myth of the perfect mother through Marissa's experience. In the drama, Marissa is not the flawless image of the Virgin Mary in traditional narratives: she has her own professional anxiety, emotional fluctuations, and even occasional oversights due to daily fatigue. However, the series firmly states that these imperfections are a natural part of her as a real individual and do not constitute a reason for her child's disappearance, let alone an excuse for society to deprive her of her subjectivity.

The value of the series lies in the fact that it does not portray a superwoman who overcomes everything, but rather presents a complex subject struggling, confused, but always persevering in thinking and acting in extreme trauma. Her persistence in tracking the cake clues, her calmness when she saw through her husband's lies, and her resolute counterattack in the end — these actions did not stem from the nature of a perfect mother, but from a woman who was pushed to the brink of despair, her desire for truth, her demand for justice, and her defense of self-dominance. This narrative reconstruction transforms motherhood from a romanticized natural duty to a challenging social practice that requires wisdom and courage. It liberates women from the shackles of perfect morality and provides them with a legitimate space to express their true emotions, needs, and power, thereby recognizing and affirming the diversity and subjectivity of motherhood experience ^[6].

Secondly, in the patriarchal order, visual power and discourse power are often intertwined. Men usually occupy the positions of viewers and judges, while women are fixed in the object status of viewers and judges ^[7]. This structure systematically limits women's agency, marginalizing their voices and constraining their actions. The core of Marissa's story is a fierce struggle against this power structure. Her rebellion began with a reversal in the direction of her gaze. When the media and society scrutinized her with suspicion and condemnation, she did not internalize this gaze, but instead cast her gaze in the opposite direction — towards her flawed husband, towards the evasive nanny, towards all overlooked details. This active gaze is a cognitive uprising: she refuses to accept the established narrative framework—the tragedy of a careless mother, and instead uses her own observations and reasoning to investigate, question, and piece together the truth. She transformed from an object of scrutiny to an active subject of investigation. This transformation directly challenges the gendered distribution of power ^[8]. When she pushed the investigation to turn with the evidence she discovered, she was actually competing for the right to define the event. She no longer waits for the police or her husband to give an answer, but uses her own discoveries to force the system to respond.

Therefore, Marissa's practice goes beyond individual revenge. She demonstrated how women can open up space for themselves in areas of power that originally excluded them through systematic observation, rational analysis, and decisive action. What she regained was not only the truth about her own child, but also a discourse position — a subject position that could tell her own story, define her own situation, and influence injustice ^[9]. This provides a revelation for all women in similar structural dilemmas: liberation begins with rejecting the defined gaze and bravely examining the world with one's own eyes, searching for the key to breaking through.

Finally, the reason why Marissa's story has social significance is that it does not stop at the victory of an exceptional woman. Her struggle and rebellion reflect the hidden traumas shared by countless women under the discipline of motherhood: the pressure of being demanded of perfection, the injustice of being held accountable in crisis, and the sense

of powerlessness of being deprived of voice. Her journey shows that resistance is not always a public cry; it can be a meticulous observation in silence, a logical reasoning in despair, and a firm trust in one's own intuition and memory. This resistance model, based on intelligence and resilience, provides a valuable path for women to resist micro-oppression in daily life. It tells the audience that the power structure is not a monolithic entity, but rather contains cracks, lies, and logical loopholes that can be cracked.

In the end, Marissa achieved individual liberation and redemption through her personal actions. However, the real question left by the series is societal: do we still need and want to create the next Marissa? Her story is like a prism, reflecting the systemic injustice that exists in the existing gender order and expectations of motherhood. It calls for society to reflect and reconstruct: abandon the myth worship of the perfect mother, establish a more supportive family and social system, recognize parenting as a shared responsibility, and ultimately respect every woman as a complete independent subject.

4. Conclusion

All Her Fault showcases a wonderful reversal of gaze through the visual practice of Marissa, the protagonist of the mother profession. Patriarchy constructs a disciplinary system for motherhood through multi-level and all-round visual gaze, placing women in a passive and judgmental position; Marissa, on the other hand, achieved a reversal of visual power through her gaze at details, her reverse gaze towards patriarchal gaze, and her mutual gaze with other women, completing the transformation of her identity from being gazed upon to being gazed upon. Her anti-disciplinary practice not only shattered the myth of the perfect mother and reconstructed the diverse image of motherhood, but also challenged the gender power structure under patriarchy, triggering profound reflection on the issues of motherhood and gender equality in society. In the current social context where gender inequality still exists, the narrative of *All Her Fault* has important practical significance. It reminds us that women can only achieve true self-empowerment and liberation by actively fighting for visual power and discourse power, breaking the rules and oppression of patriarchy^[10]. Future feminist media creation and research should continue to focus on the fate and demands of motherhood, and promote the development of gender equality through more diverse and rebellious narratives.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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