

The female gaze: Discussing the filming of *Hustlers* with cinematographer Todd Banhazl

by [Mads Lennon](#)

Hustlers is a highly-anticipated new film about a group of strippers who plan to take their power back as they hustle the wealthy men of Wall Street during the late-2000s financial crisis. The movie is based on the 2015 New York magazine article, [The Hustlers at Scores](#), by Jessica Pressler. It is being directed and written by Lorene Scafaria and contains an all-star cast of actresses including Jennifer Lopez, Constance Wu, Julia Stiles, Keke Palmer, Lili Reinhart, Lizzo, and Cardi B.

When you think about a movie starring strippers, it's easy to point out many in the past that have exploited their female characters through sexual means, often with violence included. We had the chance to speak with *Hustlers*' cinematographer, Todd Banhazl about how his vision for the film involved giving their power back to them and not utilizing male gaze-y camera techniques.

We also discuss his previous work with artists like Janelle Monae and how *Hustlers* is a crazy cross between *Clueless* and *Wolf of Wall Street*.

Hidden Remote: What initially intrigued you about *Hustlers*?

Todd Banhazl: What initially intrigued me about the project is exactly what is in the trailer. I wanted to see women who are strippers in roles of power. It's good to see a movie that treats them like they are bad*sses and a movie where we can love the criminals.

HR: When you first approached the film, did you already have an idea in mind of how you wanted it to look on-camera?

TB: When I first met with Lorene, the director, I had ideas about wanting to shoot the movie in ways we usually shoot men. I wanted to make a crime epic. I think Lorene had similar ideas, so we connected immediately on that. From there, we built the rest together.

HR: I've seen people saying this movie is like *Wolf of Wall Street* but from a female perspective, would you say that's accurate?

TB: Yes, I think that's accurate. I think *Wolf of Wall Street* was a benchmark for us.

HR: We don't typically see stories about strippers from their point-of-view. How did you guys ensure the camera work wasn't exploitative or too male gaze-y?

TB: We talked a lot about how to shoot the film from the position of the female gaze. We also talked about the idea that what they're doing is physically intense activity. We talked about shooting them like they are athletes. We looked at sports movies for references more than other strip club movies.

We wanted them to look like gladiators stepping out into the colosseum. I also think that telling the story truthfully, giving the women the room to make mistakes and be fully rendered people is the way to show women like this in a different light. It gives them the same kind of respect that we offer to any character.

HR: You said some sports movies inspired you, were there any other female-centric stories you looked to while filming?

TB: We talked about the movie, *Clueless*. We wanted to make a female friendship movie, a film that a 14-year-old girl would claim as her favorite. We said we wanted *Wolf of Wall Street* meets *Clueless* and if we can do that we've done right.

HR: I know that many of the stunts they do are pretty intense. We saw some of that in the trailer. Did the actresses have to train intensely for the roles?

TB: Yes, they all trained for the film. They all took classes. I think JLo had a pole installed in her home to do training. I mean the stuff they're doing in the movie is so physical and so incredible.

HR: I'm excited to see more of it. I was impressed by the brief tease of stunts from the trailer.

TB: That's how we felt while shooting it. There is a scene in the movie where Jen does a big strip scene, and she blew everyone away with her strength and power. It's tough to be up on that pole.

HR: Were you mindful of making sure you passed the Bechdel test?

TB: You know, honestly, I think the Bechdel test was passed in the early stages. It was never an issue for us because that's just what the movie is. It's about women who want things other than men. That's the real power of *Hustlers*. We're not trying to pass the Bechdel test. It's just a work that exists in that space.

HR: Right, I think the Bechdel test is the bottom rung of the ladder. It's the easiest one to pass. It's great to hear you guys didn't even have to think about it

TB: I think you're so right. We didn't set out to make a feminist movie. We just wanted to create characters that we love. I think that's maybe the most revolutionary thing you can do in this current state is to tell stories about characters you love who happen to be women.

It's a huge deal, which is sad that we're at that place. It's a movie about female strippers who take their power back, which is a unique thing but that's why it's so exciting too

HR: I know you worked with Janelle Monae in the past, and you've done some fashion work. Did that help inform your vision on *Hustlers*?

TB: Yes, I spent a lot of time thinking about ways to photograph women in ways that empower them. I wanted to show people in their element and not negate sexual power but honor it. I think of shooting Janelle Monae, who is so incredible and so creative, as was training grounds for the way we wanted to do *Hustlers* visually.

HR: If you could choose the main message or emotion you wanted your audience to walk away from after seeing this movie, what would it be?

TB: I would hope that people love these characters and love the friendship. I hope they leave the movie having had a great time and also having fallen in love with the characters like you would with any other film.