

Research Theory Essay
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In just a little over half a century the western world has seen some unfathomable changes. As the cogs of our industrious world have been turning, much change has been a result and at a phenomenal pace. From black and white film photography, to full blown colour on a digital screen. From the Box Television to a flat screen in-home cinema, party lines to video calls. These things seem strange and meniscal when mentioned but being present through some of these changes has been a mind-blowing spectacle. The rushing society has moved away from closed shops on weekends to shops that never close. New career opportunities have been created from these changes and women are now in the running alongside men. Not only has there been a shift in equality for women within employment, education, gender roles and sexuality have all been shifting and continue to do so. However, within this shifting of society it is reasonable to question whether Western cultural practice and ideological constructs have also changed. With access to media we could have only dreamed of 50 years ago, I desire to make an inquiry into how this new technological world and the influences of film and media culture have changed the representations and stereotypes that have long ensued the image of a women within Western culture. Has the 21st century woman been liberated by new forms of fresh and freeing representations in this new society? This essay focuses on the ideologies of last century, centring on the journey into a new media world, film and visual media influence and the post- feminism female. Through the lens of Laura Mulvey's 'Male Gaze', we can begin to better understand how film and media effect the daily lives of women and Western society. Perhaps through such a quest, we might also better understand how such representations and constructs of society work within our own ways of seeing, communicating and being.

"Keep her where she belongs ..." was the slogan for an advert for Weyenberg Massagic shoes (1974), which depicted no stereotypical housewife, rather the image was of a woman, laying nude, on the floor, breast only covered by her arms, starring longingly at a man's shoe. The advertisement was not on its own in the sexism pile unfortunately, in fact, in the years before the women's rights movement of the 70's, there was barely a clearing of throat at such ads. The American Tobacco company published an advert created by advertising executive F. William Free which read "Cigarettes are like women; the best ones are thin and rich" for their product Silva Thins Cigarettes (1970). But hey, we are in 2020 now kids, there will be no more boy girl slander on the playground now, surely. The 70's was a time of change in many aspects of western society, and the questioning of views and values which we had upheld in society, for more than a century, was also on the rise.

Film and television were reasonably fresh on the scale of evolution in mainstream society in the seventies. British feminist film theorist, Laura Mulvey, was interested in the dynamics between men

and women, the representations of woman in film and the effects that this was having on the newly envisaged world of equality. (Mulvey, 1975) Her essay *Visual and other Pleasures written in 1973* introduced the 'Male Gaze' theory which became essential to film theory and discourse and is still relevant today. The concept of the Male Gaze has also informed theory within most, if not all, visual art mediums. Heavily influenced by the psychoanalytic theorist Sigmund Freud and his thoughts around the sexual pleasure of viewing or *scopophilia*, Mulvey's theory on the Male Gaze discusses how women are portrayed in film (Mulvey, 1975). There are three important participatory aspects within the theory of the Male Gaze; that of the camera, being the tool for seeing or viewing, the characters and their interactions with each other as well as with the camera and the audience who watches the final visual media presented. These three components play an integral role in the gratification produced through viewing. Both the audience and the camera however must be invisible within the work, to enable the 'screen illusion', which is the drawing in of the audience to the film narrative and fantasy. This illusion that the camera and audience does not exist is critical for the viewing of the spectator for, without their absence, the illusion of 'reality' within the fantasy cannot be achieved and therefore the sexual pleasure that is created in such active voyeuristic viewing cannot be achieved either (Mulvey, 1975, p. 26). This visual pleasure is directed at the male audience or Male Gaze and feeds off very innate human behaviour. Ego libido, is also discussed in Mulvey's essay, which is the combination of both narcissism and the constitution of the ego, which comes from the male audiences association with the male character and what is seen (Mulvey, 1975). The heavy inference on male as the active participant and female as passive is an important and intentional use of narrative. The camera is the tool, whereby the spectator is drawn into the gaze from a male perspective; it replicates the movements that are consistent with the human eye, drawing on aspects of the female body, not in a whole sense, but fragmented, dismembered parts, creating the objectification of the female. This forces the spectators to look upon the woman's body as the camera has presented it, from a Male gaze point of view. As Mulvey (1975) explains,

The camera becomes the mechanism for producing an illusion of Renaissance space, flowing movements compatible with the human eye, and ideology of representation that revolves around the perception of the subject; the camera's look is disavowed in order to create a convincing world in which the spectator's surrogate can perform the verisimilitude. (p. 26)

This kind of minimisation of the female character into an object by dismemberment of body parts and visually removing them from the whole person is also greatly used in advertising. Jean Kilbourne, activist, and writer, mentions in a powerful presentation about the dangers to society in how we are advertising (*TEDxTalks*, 2014, 06:04–07:02). In short, the Male Gaze is described by Mulvey (1975) as that of a heterosexual, patriarchal way of viewing the female, in film, as the

spectator, in a voyeuristic sense. This creates a sexual pleasure response through the sexualisation and objectification of the female body. In staging the female character as passive, the director places the participatory male in a position of power, or control within the narrative. This is also compelling the audience into seeing the Female and Male characters in particular ways, whether the eye is drawn to a particular body part is not of importance, as the camera will take your eye there, under the wishful control of the director.

Somewhat differing from Mulvey's thoughts on the Male Gaze and also expressing an additional point of view from the position of postfeminist media culture, which has essentially come out of the woman's rights movements of the 70's in which Mulvey was active in. Rosalind Gill, in her article *Postfeminist Media Culture, Elements of Sensibility* (2007), addresses ideas of the movement towards female sexual empowerment and a new informative stand point of understanding within a contemporary media representational context and how this plays out within western society. She suggests that women are no longer subjected to the same passive Male Gaze of the 70's, but rather women now obtain the power to choose. Gill puts forward the position "Women are not straightforwardly objectified but are portrayed as active subjects who choose to present themselves in an objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so" (Gill, 2007, p. 151). Women are free to assert dominance and essentially use this sexuality within society as a way to assert a successful position in a misogynistic capitalist society. The price of this new postfeminist culture is one of self-surveillance where women now can be the women they want to be, but are measuring themselves against an unattainable standard, no longer under the judgement of the Male Gaze, but of themselves. There is a specific image, white, young, firm bodied, heterosexual female, presented in media as desirable, women are ever chasing a moving and narrowing ideology, which in turn also feeds into neoliberal consumerism. Gill suggests in her writing that it is neoliberalism that is selling perfection under the banner of empowerment and feminism, while women try to attain the hyper-sexualised ideal that they are now free to be (Gill, 2007, p. 156).

Technology and visual media have moved full steam ahead since Mulvey (1975) introduced her argument. These technological developments are changing the way in which western society interacts with media and the world around us. Visual media is no longer a choice of whether or not to have a television in your home. Rather, it is a question of how to balance the amount of exposure to media within our homes, at work and school and within our social environments. Media is everywhere. Because of the abundance of media exposure, the Male Gaze is no longer just experienced in the privacy of the cinema. In line with all the shifting times the modern woman is now far from the apron strings of her forbearers, no longer tied only to the household duties. It would appear that women within our modern western society, now have much more freedom of

choice but, as Shelia Jeffreys (2014) suggests in her book *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful cultural practices in the West* within the cultural practices of western society, not all is choice, aligning with Rosalind Gills line of thought (pp. 6–10). The new pervasive use of media and objectification has resulted not in choice, but in an illusion of choice. Consistent with other forms of societal, systemic oppression, Women have become programmed in such a way that beautification and perfection appears to be the notion of the woman, not a result of cultural ideology. Women have begun to see their own bodies as an object separated from the rest of her person. The body then is seen and measured not only by others, but by herself, as sexual parts that preform sexual functions. As society has become more overtly objectifying, women have become more conscious of the body, thus women “become alienated from their own bodies” (Jeffreys, 2014, p. 8).

The Male Gaze is not the only imbalance associated with being female. The expectations of a woman within western culture are clearly, though often implicitly, communicated within our society. The construction of gender and gender roles, traits and social norms are learned early on in childhood. We are not born with gender; this is learnt (Carl, 2010, p. 77). Though parenting has come a long way from mums waving off the family, only to head back inside to get on with her duties as wife and mother, roles such as housework, child rearing and cooking are still predominantly seen as female roles, even if that female is also sharing the breadwinner role with her partner. Gender specific toys still perpetuate gender difference between boys and girls and media still plays a major part in the education of patriarchal systems and gender difference within society and this almost always comes back to the “sexualisation of young girls”(Carl, 2010, pp.78). Sex sells, we hear it all the time, but to whom are we selling? It would seem more accurately sexism sells and the indoctrination of ideologies and perfection. As expressed by Karen Ross in her book about Women, Men, and gender identity,

Sex is everywhere, not just in the places it has always been, such as films, pop videos and advertising, but as a primary thematic on talk shows, in the subtext of Big Brother and, of course, spectacularly omnipresent on the internet. Arguably, the main reason we see sex everywhere is precisely because sex sells and in a capitalist economy sex is simply another commodity to be bought and sold (Ross, 2009, pp. 51).

We have grown better at creating more alluring imagery to sell. Sexualisation and objectification within media is everywhere and when we talk about sex selling, we can expect that the sex we are talking about is female. What was found only in adult strip joints and in dad’s side table 50 years ago, is now accepted as common place with no limitations on audience. Sexualised media is everywhere, and a part of our everyday. We no longer have to shamefully peruse the magazine stand to catch an eye full; we now exhibit what would have been considered X rated only a few

decades before, in the windows of clothing outlets in busy malls, for every Tom, Dick and little Janie to catch an informative glance. Though we may have moved away from the overtly sexist stereotypical house wife adverts with misogynistic slogans, we have moved into more pervasive ways to indoctrinate the western culture with representations of women.

The film industry and advertising are still largely dominated by white males, which has been the major factor for excessive and disproportionate amounts of media being created from the white heterosexual male perspective. We still see women sprawled across both women and men's magazine covers in the supermarkets. Regardless of the target market, women still find themselves the main "object" of desire. It is important to note that though the Male Gaze is for the male audience, women have still been a part of that audience and subject to the perspective. Women, as well as men, have been exposed to the visual material created for the male experience. Though a woman's experience differs as a female onlooker and audience, this has still had an immense effect on the way that women see themselves from the position of the Male Gaze. In western culture, the dominant in society does not often contemplate the implications of oppression upon the oppressed. Men are now too, sprawled across advertisements or shirtless in movies, changing a few factors in the depiction of the man. But as the power position within the text is the main factor of the Male Gaze theory, strutting muscular men on screens does not change the balance of power or dominance. This in fact, still portrays the male in a way, or stereotype that pleases the male spectator (Mulvey, 1975, pp.16-19). It is not diminishing of a male's position of power for men in media to be depicted in such a way, nor does it create the equality of a Female Gaze. The gaze is about viewing media from a specific gender's perspective. This imbalance in male perspective within media, still dominates western perspective and the sexualisation and objectification of the female body is more visible than ever. Jean Kilbourne, activist and writer, is quoted in an article saying;

"Advertising itself has become much more sophisticated ... it's more ubiquitous than ever before. It's everywhere. The tyranny of the ideal image of beauty, for example, is much worse now because of Photoshop. Images can be 'Photoshopped' to make people look completely flawless. ...The other thing that has gotten worse is the sexualisation of children. ... We still don't have a critical mass of consciousness about the issue, not by a long shot. But we have way more consciousness about it than we did before" (Anglely, 2015).

Kilbourne makes two interesting points, one of beautifying and perfection and the other of the sexualisation of children. I would firstly like to address the second. Research from King et al. (2011) in the book, *Animating difference: Race, gender and sexuality in contemporary films for children*, it is suggested that children's animated films significantly inform young children of social norms and Western cultural ideologies. Animated films are increasingly emphasising sexuality in the female

heroine. There is also an equal emphasis on the racialization. In instances where the character is of another ethnicity or not even human at all, they are shown, by features, mannerisms and speech as possessing a type of whiteness “The sexualised and radicalised images in contemporary animated films, and the meaning derived from them...when watching and analysing these films, we need to keep in mind that the racialization of female characters in animated films is an extension of social, historical, and cultural contexts” (King et al., 2011, p.95). What is presented in children’s films is what is shown to be the normal to children, thus the representations and stereotypes within these films are of extreme importance as a tool to continue to instil cultural norms, social systems, patriarchal society, the ‘appropriate’ social position of both men and woman, as well as whiteness as normal, which creates ‘the other’ and difference. The first point Kilbourne made was about the emphasis on ideal beauty and unrealistic perfected appearance of woman within media, by way of editing. Angela McRobbie (2015) in her Notes on the Perfect, suggests that the relentless nature of media towards the image of women is compared to entering a daily beauty pageant, being measured up against one another, being liked (or disliked) on social media (pp.5-6). This could suggest also that the male gaze may now be accelerated by this on-going pageant. No longer does a woman need to walk by a construction site for a degrading wolf whistle or three, there can be countless thumbs up on her social media bikini shot, or an unseemly inconsequential emoji suggesting disapproval. Women have been catapulted into a constant underlying awareness of the bar of perfection, with serious implications on mental health, physical health and affecting the fragility of life itself (McRobbie, 2015).

American artist, Cindy Sherman has been working for decades on concepts of womanhood and identity and made works of film stills, though not from actual films, that looked at representations of women within film (Foster,1996). Sherman created cliché images of stereotypical representations of woman, creating a staging or unrealistic sense of the passive placement of women within a patriarchal society. What makes Sherman’s work stand out in this instance is the consistent appropriation of what is recognisably the Male Gaze; however, because Sherman is the subject and creator of the image, this produces a subverting of this Male Gaze.

In the early work of 1975-82, from the film stills through the rear projections to the centrefolds and the colour tests, Sherman evokes the subject under the gaze, the subject-as-picture, which is also the principal site of other feminist work in early appropriation art. Her subjects see, of course, but they are much more seen, captured by the gaze. Often, in the film stills and the centrefolds, this gaze seems to come from another subject, with whom the viewer may be implicated; sometimes, in the rear projections, it seems, to come from the spectacle of the world. Yet often, too, this gaze seems to come from within. Here Sherman shows her female subjects as self-surveyed, not in phenomenological

immanence (I see myself seeing myself) but in psychological estrangement (I am not what I imagined myself to be) (Foster, 1996, pp. 148).

The early works from Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* are evocative even today, where we recognise the vulnerability in the positioning of the subject and the composition of the imagery created by the camera as a tool. There is a definite presence within these works reminiscent of 1950's Hollywood and the voyeuristic onlooker. Avant-garde in the 1970's but perhaps, applicable for such a time as now, in a society saturated by images of woman and the surveying of one's self. The subverting of the gaze is created in Sherman's work because of the overt appropriation of the female as object, a subject to gaze upon, passive and vulnerable, but Sherman has displayed this, announced it, evoking a challenge to the viewer, as the subject and the maker. Not so far from our now daily exposure to media, being both the spectator and spectacle and the on-going evaluation of self within a society dominated by visual media from a male perspective, even though, the male is no longer always behind the camera, as now women are subjected to their own evaluation, but inherently still from a male perspective. But perhaps this subverting of the Male Gaze used by Sherman, could be adopted more prevalently within a female society still very much oppressed by the hyper sexualised prevailing depiction of woman as no more than an object for the heterosexual male consumption.

In conclusion of this inquest into how the practices and ideological constructs within western culture influence the way women are represented within society, I feel it appropriate to say, that Laura Mulvey's Male Gaze is still an invaluable concept in our current times. Mulvey's Male Gaze is a tool in which we can better understand feminist theory and the significance of such within our culture. The portrayal of the female as an object of sexual desire in film has not dwindled into an irrelevant pile. To the contrary, it has exploded into mainstream media making it impossible to ignore. What we are also unable ignore is the prevailing sexualisation of the female body aside from the person, and the ideologies of perfection placed on women by film, advertising and almost all other forms of media. The danger of this relentless sexualised visual media excess is not one that can be disregarded, but some say embraced. Women now have the freedom to choose, and so it has been said, the freedom to use this sexualisation to climb corporate ladders while the men are blinded by cleavage and predictably topple off that ladder. Sexualisation is presented as new feminine power but is it power or neoliberalism? Our still, white male dominance capitalises on the desires of women, and the desire is seen through media. Women have been indoctrinated by an unobtainable beauty that is every changing, and with this comes the need for industry. Artist Cindy Sherman has been interested in the interplay of film and other types of media with the constructs of western culture and how women are represented. Sherman's early works interestingly subvert the Male

Gaze and create contemplation around the concept of spectator and spectacle. What is dominant within western society is dominant within our media, whiteness, men, young, thin, and taut, and perfect all create social normalities, in which children learn to then associate the opposite with the 'other', and then, isolating themselves or others within society. Prejudice is formed not from birth but is learnt. The social constructs that continues to uphold stereotypical archetypes of women as objects, no matter how contemporary and liberated it seems, effect the way in which men and women see, communicate, and essentially connect with one another. In such a world where equality is still a social failing, we can in fact consider within our own communication, the way in which, as individuals, we choose to navigate and participate in such a society.

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