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Introduction to Visual Culture

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A Look at Reconfiguring the Gaze

Essentially defined as the way people look at subjects in a given context, the gaze has properties that extend outside of a fleeting expression. The development of the gaze as a concept denotes a sense of prolonged focus. It consists of intent and curiosity, resulting in reason and meaning. It involves some form of intellect, which explains its common use in analyzing visual culture and art. Yet, the concept of the gaze didn't come to the forefront until the rise of modern philosophy and social theory, first discussed theorists such as Jacques Lacan. Theories of the development of human psyche, like the mirror phase, were applied to the understanding of visual art, reflecting on the past and contributing to the current. A gaze provides a plethora of interpretations about the viewer's relationship to the subjects, or the relationships between the subjects upon whom one gazes, or the situation in which the subjects are doing the gazing. It is a visual language that reflects emotion without speech. It can signify a hierarchy of power between who can look and what is revealed, an idea that illustrates its importance as a form of communication. This asymmetry is extended within the context of feminist philosophy, where theorist Laura Mulvey coins the term the "male gaze". Using examples of cinema, she unpacks how men look at women, how women look at themselves and other women, and the psychological effects encompassing it. Simply, she identifies masculinity as active and femininity as passive. While this assessment of male gaze is a valid platform, critics and theorists including Mulvey herself, have recognized a much more complex discourse. Consideration of an identity for the female spectator who actively desires or a non-heterosexual/non-gender-binary model of desire has been applied. Responses such as the 'female gaze' and the 'queer gaze' have emerged in art making. The lines that were drawn by men in order to satisfy their own desire have been challenged with the rejection of sexualization and objectification of women throughout history. The LGBTQ efforts have chipped away at the heteronormative

constructs of assuming gender by one's appearance. Many have turned their gaze inward in order to understand the gaze within self-portraiture. The duality of the artist as both the creator and the subject reconstructs another means for the gaze as a means to define and redefine the self. It is important that these reconfigurations become an integral part of the discourse of visual culture.

In order to understand the subgenres of the gaze, one must trace back to the original concepts of spectatorship and desire. Before the twentieth century, the gaze was represented by how it functioned within the composition. It rarely extended a question beyond the canvas itself, becoming synonymous with a glance. Different forms of the gaze have been characterized by who is looking. Traditionally, the spectator's gaze is often who is viewing the work. The intra-diegetic gaze is where one person depicted in the composition is looking at another person or object. Seeing one's gaze upon another provides a lot of information about the relationship of the subjects to one another as well as the viewer's relationship to the subjects overall. Current art criticism focuses on how the gaze is used as a way to communicate between the viewer and what's being viewed. Jacques Lacan's 1932 essay *The Mirror Stage* exemplifies the age of one's self-recognition as the fulcrum for differentiating reality and the ideal. Philippe Jullian, a French illustrator and art historian wrote in his book *Jacques Lacan Return to Freud: The Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary*, "In the mirror phase, Lacan compressed two phases into one. At the very moment when the ego is formed by the image of the other, narcissism and aggressivity are correlatives. Narcissism, in which the image of one's own body is sustained by the image of the other, in fact introduces a *tension*: the other in his image both attracts and rejects me...This other who is myself is other than myself"(Jullian 34). Thus, this realization of one's existence also points to one's lack. The idea of feeling "whole" is sought out in objects the symbolize desire. Desire is aimed at the very deficiency it supports: the desire for something else. Lacan later argues that there is a connection between what coordinates our desire and the gaze. As mentioned before, the gaze signifies a relationship of power, suggesting what should be looked at and who has the right to look. This moment of seeking out gives a sense of temporary control, yet images are made to interpellate viewers, which is then transmitted back into the loop of desire.

As psychoanalytic film theory developed, it began to examine the particular dynamics of the gaze in an effort to clarify its symbolic undertow. In *Visual Pleasure and*

Narrative Cinema, Laura Mulvey applies the gaze with male spectatorship and the ideological functions of desire. In film, it has been debated that women are typically the objects of the gaze because the camera controls come from the conjecture of heterosexual men as the assumed audience, while the male protagonist exists for them to identify with. The idea of male gaze has been pushed to and fro by critics in a wide variety of films, but it still has relevance with directors such as Michael Bay, particularly in his *Transformers* series. In the first movie of the series, *Transformers*, Bay establishes the first scene of Mikaela (Megan Fox) stranded, walking by herself on the side of the road (Fig A). Sam (Shia LaBeouf), the young male protagonist, stops to give her a ride. Aware of the fact that Sam's car is a robot, it is clear that it intentionally "breaks down". Mikaela props open the hood to inspect the issue. This brief moment shows a glimmer of her autonomy and intelligence, but is quickly distracted by the overbearing attention to her body by Sam and the camera. The camera neglects to focus on the car, the initial cause for the scene. Traditionally, an establishing scene such as this is designed to introduce the setting, characters, and objects that illustrate the direction of the narrative. The little dialogue between Sam and Mikaela includes her describing what she looks for in a man. Therefore, the only clear description the audience has of the lead female role in the movie is that she is attractive and in need of a man to save her. The lack of character development could almost suggest that she is just "part of the scenery" as the camera angles to separate parts of her body instead of her as an active role.

Additionally, the third movie in the series *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, the movie opens up with Carly (Rosie Huntington Whitely), another lead female role, barely dressed as she ascends up a flight of stairs. (Fig B The camera pans to different parts of her, singling them out, breaking apart the visual representation of her character. Aside from the camera, Carly remains deep within the gaze of the male actors. Moreover, her entire role in the movie is as a hostage. Mulvey mentions in her essay, "The presence of a woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation." (Mulvey 62) Carly is completely dependent on the male protagonist to save her, insinuating that she is helpless. Her character repeatedly blocks the progression of the plot. Sexualization, objectification, and inherent insignificance of these female roles are a clear indication of the credibility of Laura Mulvey's theory.

While film was the catalyst for a new conversation, the male gaze has been applied to other types of media. Throughout history, men have made art to be purchased by other men, in order to feed an economy saturated with the male gaze, as well as promote female competitiveness. John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* emphasizes that women have always been depicted as nude, put on display for the spectator. The spectator, who is assumed a man, is geared to see a woman in art as an object that he owns, since he is the one who is able to commission, buy, and keep the work as his own possession. Berger also uses an array of themes that have been used to objectify women. He analyzes the scrutiny women have experienced for being vain. When a woman is painted with a mirror in her hand, it is “a symbol of the vanity of the woman” (Berger 50). A classic example of this is the 1485 painting *Vanity* by Hans Memling. The nudity was depicted at the artist’s own discretion to justify his desires, yet she is blamed for representing vanity and lust. She is placed outside amongst dogs, metaphorically representing the assumed status of a woman’s capacity throughout history. While she holds the mirror, she looks outward, renouncing any awareness of her own power. Time after time, women are put on display at a man’s command, yet when they occupy an admiration for their self-image, they are condemned.

Another substantial outlet that notoriously portrays women as objects is advertising. When Tom Ford released new line of men’s cologne in 2007, the campaign was designed to transcend the typical theme of *our product = sex*. Despite being a men’s fragrance, this ad features a completely nude female model in salacious positions with the product deliberately placed on or between the model’s body parts. (Fig C) There is no men in these photos, nor is there any information about the perfume. The only indicator that this is an ad for men is the text stating “Tom Ford For Men” across the bottom. Advertisements such as this do not directly sell the product or inform you about any of the perfume’s features. In this campaign, Tom Ford was selling a lifestyle that men should desire. The different body parts of the model are broken down into separate ads, completely dismembering her as a person, and using her “best” attributes as a kind of pedestal for the product. Similar to what the camera work did in the *Transformers* movies, the designers of the ad completely stripped the model of her own agency, and neglected to consider the way advertisements construct the way women are looked at.

Even still, western culture seems unable to move forward from the intent to depict women as commodities. But, increasingly, there are artists that confront and defy the

male gaze. For example, portrait photographers in fashion have made photographs that admire women in a way that doesn't strip them of their autonomy, allowing the women in the image to be the "surveyors" instead of "surveyed". Well-known magazines like *Vanity Fair* have published images that work to strike the viewer while confronting the male gaze. A recent *Vanity Fair* Hollywood Edition features a group of diverse women draped in beautiful fabrics (Fig D). One might consider that the dresses they are wearing reference back the lavish fabrics that would accompany nude women in Renaissance paintings. But, contrary to the static and submissive depictions of women from that era, these women express confidence, intelligence, and superiority. Each individual is unique from one another, carrying a bold sense self-disposition, and articulating power. Additionally, the group is positioned in a variety of ways, none of them lethargic or prone. Instead, the women are actively confronting the gaze of the viewer, while asserting their own gaze. As a united group, these women are not just being looked at—they are looking back at the viewer. With their confrontational awareness, they do not allow their bodies to be accessed for male viewing pleasure.

It will take many photographs like the one from *Vanity Fair* to dismantle the overrun aesthetic of the male gaze, but images that oppose it offer progress in a better direction. New artistic traditions have been created to disrupt the lingering voyeuristic treatments from the previous era, and usher in a fresh, new perspective of female beauty in art. Over the recent years, more and more women are contributing their vision, considering their position as the "female gaze". Zing Tsjeng, an editor from *Broadly* magazine, notes, "If the male gaze is thought to be toxic, the female gaze is corrective. It is a perfect, virtuous cycle, and entirely natural." (Jansen 7) While in its infant stages, there may not be a definitive way to describe the female gaze, but the multiplicities of its portrayal of women are relieving.

Consider Chloe Wise's painting *My sad heart and your stiff nipples as the Biennale* (Fig E). Wise paints an intimate portrait of a female lying on what appears to be a mirror, yet her left hand is covering the reflection. Her right arm wraps around her head as she gazes directly at the viewer. Her expression is sharp and perceptive. Her hair falls naturally on her semi-transparent blouse, which resembles the flora that surrounds her. The palette and application of the paint is soft and voluptuous, similar to the iconic feminist Georgia O'Keefe's paintings. A plastic cup that is filled to the top with liquid is placed before her. This

work is potentially a response to Berger's previous observation on women looking into mirrors in classical painting compositions. While it is clear that a reflection lies beneath her, she chooses to block it, insisting that the viewer makes contact with her own gaze. What previously symbolized as vanity at the discretion of the male artist is now rejected and in the female's control. This work suggests that the idea of self-admiration should not conjure conviction, but rather be embraced. The objects placed around her symbolize efflorescence, abundance, and growth. Chloe Wise in embarking upon illustrating the lush and bountiful, but also the impermanence of it. While flowers will wilt and die, and cups will run dry, beauty will fade but the power of a woman is relentless.

Another example flourishing area for the female gaze is music videos. Sex in pop culture is considered normative and almost necessary in order to succeed. In music videos, there are countless examples of passive, sultry women, half naked, gyrating for men. While embracing sexuality is nothing to be ashamed of, it is imperative that musicians depart from the sea of passive, objective femininity that has encapsulated the music video industry. For instance, Sia is an internationally known pop star who has released several, extremely popular hits. Her music videos are interesting because of her deliberate decision to completely remove any visual representation of herself from her work. She uses a young dancer, Maddie Ziegler, as her surrogate. Sia's decision to become anonymous asks: does a woman in pop really need to sell her sexuality, let alone her image, in order to achieve success? Kat George from *Dazed* magazine implies, "She [Sia] asks her fans and detractors to judge her based on the merits of her art, and completely removes the temptation for prying eyes to attempt to claim her body instead. At a time when performance art arguably relies heavily on narcissism and sexuality, Sia has removed both of those from the equation while continuing to produce provocative, and massively popular, music videos."

Sia co-directs most of her videos, including *Elastic Heart*, which features Shia LaBeouf, the actor who was previously mentioned as the male protagonist in *Transformers* (Fig F). While the video has no correlation with the *Transformers* series, the importance lies in the transition of the roles that LaBeouf plays. The video takes place within a giant cage, where Ziegler and LaBeouf interact through a series of choreographed interpretive dance. Their movements are sporadic and unpredictable, but fall in sync with the music. One of the themes in the video could be the dialogue between abuse and acceptance. As Ziegler stands as a proxy, she begins by expressing emotions of anguish and distress towards LaBeouf, who

is constantly trying to capture her. Through swift, playful, yet theatrical movements, she always escapes his grasp, no matter how close he gets within reach. He chases her with desperation, and falls under her spells of falsified and forced compassion. The beauty of this video is at the end, when she realizes she is able to escape the cage in which she was trapped. This moment of freedom raises a question of what she truly wants: independence or submission? She enters the cage once more, temporarily placing herself on his back. He picks her up as she dangles lifeless, dependent, falling under a moment of defeat. Quickly, she picks herself up, wraps her body around him until her gaze is level with his. She realizes her ability to control his emotions and his actions. With this newfound power, she turns around to exit the space in which she believed that she was confined in. He follows her to the edge, realizing that he cannot occupy the territory that she has embarked upon. With one hand holding her, he attempts to pull her back in, but she resists. With the knowledge of Sia's efforts to remain "invisible", this video paraphrases all the sexualized abuse that is projected at women who exist in the pop music industry. She withdraws herself entirely from the gaze of her audience, as well as creates a commentary on the obstacles women face when being tantalized and used for a male's gain. This video illustrates the resilience of women by implying that it is possible to simultaneously build a successful career while keeping a self-respecting image.

An important aspect to point out is that the female gaze is not meant to degrade the opinions or intelligence of men, but to insist that if men wish to look at women, they should approach it with a valid, equal platform. The reason for only highlighting female artists is in efforts to bring forth a balance. Given the long-established bias of the hetero-patriarchy, a celebration of what women can achieve is overdue. The female gaze should not act on objectifying men in the same way that men have women, even if it deems itself as credible justice. The point is that only women have the right to self objectify and exploit without critique, and men must reconfigure and respect the way they look at and depict them. Charlotte Jansen writes in her book *Girl On Girl*, "The more we were exposed to genuine types of women – the more we will ever meet in real life – the more we can learn" (Jansen 9)

Other responses to the male gaze have risen since Mulvey's essay. Artists have continued the conversation on inclusion and diversity, and the distinctive outlooks LGBTQ artists have are making a notable ripple effect in reconfiguring the gaze. Although the "queer gaze" remains less known, it is a compelling response to the repeatedly unspoken

yet recurrent heteronormative culture. The queer gaze distinguishes how lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people create and view art. It is an idea that embraces without exception and meant to be a space that is occupied by anyone that are of the third gender, a combination of the two, a transition or any other various combinations and representations. Moreover, it challenges binary notions of male gaze versus female gaze conversations where the circumstance is nearly always heterosexual. Famous examples of artists ignoring the categories of gender were Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray. Ray photographed Duchamp's alter ego Rose Selavy, and put the image on a bottle of perfume (Fig G). A man that was cross dressing and branded on a feminine product was simple yet effective, and challenged the notion of desire based upon a specified gender.

In Nan Goldin's series *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* consists of a wide array of photographs she took of her friends, including the transgender and drag community. This intimate selection of images stands out from the previous works on the queer community due to their snapshot-like nature. Her work captures the impulse and lawlessness of life on the outskirts of the social norm. Goldin consciously plays with the idea that the queer image has no fixed meaning. With the camera acting as an extension of her gaze, she shows us the stable sexual identity is an illusion. Her photograph *Misty in Sheridan Square, NYC* shows a figure dressed in reflective spandex and baby blue hair (Fig H). Attributes such as large breasts suggest femininity but their defined muscular frame refutes it. Their gaze is dynamic and sly, indicating the fleeting moment that Goldin was able to capture. In the background stands a police officer, smiling with his hand ironically holding a phallic object at the height of his crotch. Questioning whether or not the person is male or female is beside the point. The idea is that there is no specific model to follow for sexual attraction, nor is there any boundaries for which how people can identify. In her book *The Other Side*, Goldin states, "The pictures in this book are not of people suffering gender dysphoria but rather expressing gender euphoria...The people in these pictures are truly revolutionary; they are the real winners in the battle of the sexes because they have stepped out of the ring" (Goldin 8). Goldin's work has stood the test of time, and remains to be incentive to support a culture where gender has no boundaries.

The final way in which artists are reconfiguring the gaze happens when the gaze is turned inward through self-portraiture. Initially the self-portrait illustrated the presence of the painter as their profession. Over time it has transcended as a way to construct a visual

representation of the artists consciousness and means for recording a sense of importance within their existence. Jean Paul Sartre implied that the gaze was a way for the self to define and redefine itself. Touched upon in Lacan's Mirror Phase, only when confronted with the gaze of the Other does oneself recognize that they are their own individual. By conjoining the model and the creator, the artist is erasing the lines that are drawn between the surveyor and the surveyed. Photographer Francesca Woodman spent her short-lived career exclusively making self-portraits. Her constant rejection from the photographic industry instilled a deep depression that eventually took her life. Through her contemplative moments of vulnerability, she intuitively captured her own form, surfacing the questions of identity. Consider the photographs from her *Angel* series (Fig 1). In every image, Woodman is hiding different elements. She depicts herself as a figure that is present and absent at the same time. Although she is nude, the viewer is compelled by the emptiness and obscurity that surrounds her. Her images are long-exposures with slow shutter speeds, transcending a surrealist quality that is both haunting and evanescent. In an attempt to discover an answer to the questions that oscillated within her mind, she made photographs. These were not only testimonials that could be seen by other viewers, and distinguish her from them, but as a means to reiterate her validity of existence within herself.

With the rise of these various avenues that are reconstructing the gaze, it is clear that many ways of seeing are on the horizon. Film theorists like Laura Mulvey have challenged the irrational traditions of binary oppositions in art. The male gaze began as a way to unravel our minds and eyes from an immoral practice that supported the societal mechanism of patriarchy. The fundamental pleasure in looking at women will always be unavoidable, which will continue to complicate the place women have in visual culture. Since art in the past was primarily a male dominated market, the representation of being a female was a fallacy. Recently, the concept of the female gaze emerged in order to promote universal equality. Women artists are based their work as a counterpoint to the male narrative. These steps have been an imperfect but incredibly important step towards balance. Yet, the heterosexual condition between the two did not account for what is considered the third gender. The queer gaze represents an all-encompassing application. Artists within the LGBTQ community blur the lines between the traditional structures of desire, implying that there is no set in stone rule to sexuality. This idea relates to the gaze because it scrambles the hierarchy of traditional binary oppositions. The overall gaze theory

will always possess an ever-present practice within visual culture. The infinite loop of desire that is engrained within an infant's mind at their first recognition of their autonomy will always seek out a means to satisfy the impending lack. Reading one's gaze reflects their emotion without speech. It is a language that is read universally. Yet, it inherently creates different codes for who is looking and what is being looked at. The importance of reconfiguring the gaze is that the surveyed is always in control of his/her/their own image. Elements of self-portraiture have chipped away at this way of thinking. Moving away from the objectification of women and the assumed classification of gender steer towards an ideal, harmonious interpretation of the world.

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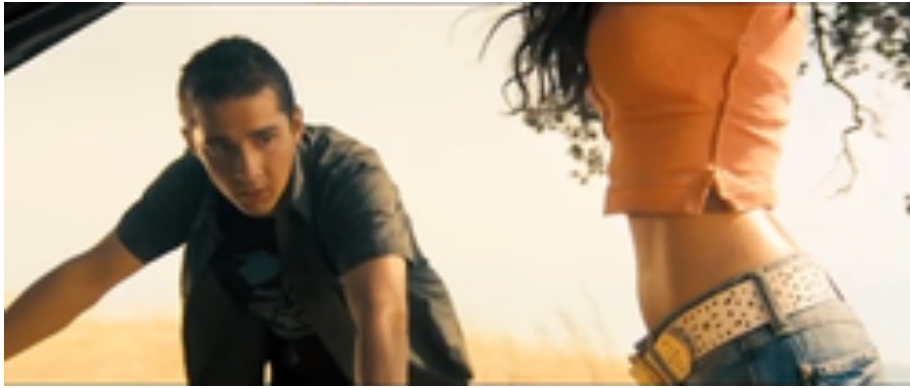
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Appendix



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0V8hDBEVP>

Fig A.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1KeWcJt6XE>

Fig B.



Fig C.

Appendix Continued



Fig D.



Fig E.

Appendix Continued



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWZGAExj-es>

Fig F.



Fig G.



Fig H.

Appendix Continued



Fig I.