



GAZING,
WITHOUT LOOKING.
BEING LOOKED AT,
BUT NOT SEEN.

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Not that long ago, I was standing in my room, alone, in front of the mirror. However, I wasn't looking at myself. I was looking at something, a thing. Something that was staring back at me. Something that looked like me, moved like me, but was not me. Not really. It had the same legs; the same arms; the same scar on the left palm of its hand from when it fell off its bike 15 years ago. It was staring back at me. Taking in my physical form just as I was doing to it. Obsessing over the size of its right thigh. The hair that was ever slightly too dark on its arms. The nail polish that was chipped and looked so uncared for. I saw the potential of the visual pleasure this thing could offer, but also all that was lacking for achieving such. It shocked me, looking at this thing staring back at me, the realization that all that I am so vocal about when it comes to others, or *us* as a collective, I could do to myself. I am the spectator; I am the spectacle. I am the surveyor; I am the surveyed. I don't need a man. I can do my own objectification, all by myself; all *to* myself. That's real female empowerment right there.

There must have been a distinct moment I became a thing, although I do not remember. For all I know, I've been a thing my entire life. A thing to be looked at, an object of vision. It might have been the first time I got catcalled while playing mermaids with a friend. Or when I saw Rear Window and its unmistakable display of the male gaze. It could've been an advertisement, with its casual and subtle violence of the fragmentation of the female form in order to sell a lawnmower or tube of toothpaste. It might have been once I realized how commonly we look at women through the eyes of men looking at women. This way of seeing appears in the books we read; the music we listen to; the paintings we see; the movies we go to; the history we are taught; the mirror we stand in front of. All around, ever-present.

The Weight of Seeing

A term, heavily used in contemporary film studies (and visual culture), is the male gaze and its accompanied “counteract”, the female gaze. They are used to describe a presentation of the world —and especially women— seen through the perspective of either (binary) genders. However, both gazes lead to binary thinking and dualism, as perhaps any gaze does. It could be argued that to gaze implies more than to look at – it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze. [1]

From the moment we come out of the womb we are spectators, observers of the world around us. And every second we spend awake we are busy gazing, looking, seeing — whether that's a conscious act or not. Therefore, it is of great importance to be critical of our own ways of seeing and to be aware of the underlying, internalized ideologies that shaped it.

It is undeniable that most living in Europe have, to some degree, been conditioned by the male gaze. But to what extent do we internalize its beliefs? And how does that not only influence how we look at women, but also ourselves?

The Male Gaze

The male gaze is the act of depicting women in the visual arts and in literature from a masculine, heterosexual perspective that presents women as sexual objects for the pleasure of the heterosexual male viewer. In narrative cinema, the woman as an erotic object of desire, is produced through three perspectives: that of the maker; the male protagonist of the story rep-

[1] *Consuming Representation: A Visual Approach to Consumer Research*, Jonathan Schroeder (1998)

resented; and the spectator gazing at the image. This creates a sense of hierarchy, in which the woman is seen as a passive object for the male gaze of the active viewer, which affirms gender roles as assigned by patriarchy. However, in photography, although resulting in the same objectification, the male gaze is produced by two perspectives: that of the maker of the image; and the spectator gazing at the image. In a photograph there is no narrative, therefore the subject represented loses autonomy by lack of context. They are flat and muted, produced to be gazed upon, vulnerable to the projections of the spectator's ideologies. This includes the subconscious conditioned sexualization which occurs within the spectator. We are taught to look at women as objects of desire, as we are constantly fed content of this nature. Having grown so used to seeing the female form fragmented, cut up into little slices of desirable skin [2], we don't even recognize this as a tool for objectification. Regardless of progress, these fundamental beliefs are hard to erase.

[2] Agnes Varda

It is also important to address how the male gaze is an exclusionary term. It reinforces binary thinking in terms of gender, but is also very ableist, white- and heterocentric, leaving no room for intersectionality or multiplicitous differences. Additionally, the feminist theoretical context addressing the effects of the male gaze, such as the essay by Laura Mulvey, is rooted in a framework that privileges sexual differences. In her critical reaction to Mulvey's essay, bell hooks wrote: "Despite feminist critical interventions aimed at deconstructing the category "woman" which highlight the significance of race, many feminist film critics continue to structure their discourse as though it speaks about "women" when in actuality it speaks only about white women." [3] By actively suppressing recognition or ignoring the influences of intersecting identities, they are adding to the erasure of marginalized people in our visual culture, which have for centuries been excluded, especially in roles of power or desire. This is also reflected in the ideals of the male gaze, where the subject's to-be-looked-at-ness and desirability is defined by her ability to conform to what is considered white femininity.

[3] *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectator*, bell hooks (1992)

The Subject and the Object

A huge part in the theory of the male gaze, as discussed by Mulvey, is scopophilia; the sexual pleasure of looking, as described by Sigmund Freud. He associated scopophilia with taking oth-

er people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling gaze [4], insinuating that there is always a power imbalance when the scopophilic drive occurs. It is claimed to be the psychological and social mechanism that realizes the practices of Other-ing a person, to exclude them from society. The social practice of scopophilia is supposed to fix the appearance and identity of the Other, who is not the Self, by way of the gaze that objectifies and dehumanizes them as "not I" and thus "not one of us". This distancing of Self and the looked-at Other is, furthermore, already implied with the word gaze. Originating from the theory of Jacques Lacan, it indicates the psychological effect upon the person subjected to the gaze, who loses the sense of autonomy upon becoming aware that they are a visible object. The effects of the gaze can be produced by an inanimate object, and thus a person's awareness of any object can induce the self-awareness of also being an object. Therefore, it can be concluded that any gaze —whether male, female, black, queer, whatever— leads to objectification, and thus, dehumanization of the one subjected to it, the surveyed.

[4] *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey (1975)

A lot can be said in favour of the innocent enjoyment of looking. That receiving pleasure from looking at another is harmless, on the contrary it's sign of appreciation. And I agree, in the sense that looking can be joyful and should be, however it's the line we are crossing when mere admiration is linked with domination, a line that is easily crossed. Whether that's out of a sense of superiority, or insecurity, it establishes a power structure. Carl Jung once stated "Where the will to power is paramount, love will be lacking". In a sense, the same goes for admiration, or harmless visual pleasure. It raises the question, is the pleasure solely based on the appreciation of beauty [5] or is there an underlying notion of control or possession? Patriarchal masculinities require of boys and men not only that they see themselves as more powerful and superior to women, but that they do whatever it takes to maintain their controlling position. [6] By reducing women to objects of sight, they easily establish female inferiority. As is illustrated by the Medusa theory, based on the Freudian believe that Medusa' "inflames the fear of castration." Therefore, through her decapitation, she becomes a defenceless object of sight —silent and bodiless — her mutilated body a symbol of how men have been able to deal with women by relegating them to visual objectivity. [7] And although these fundamental beliefs are being dismantled, it's still in the root of our thinking, and therefore, also ways of seeing. We can't see separate from our beliefs, they are inherently intertwined. So wherever we go, wherev-

[5] A lot can be said about the definition and politics of beauty, but for now I chose not to go in detail about what this "beauty" entails and just read it as something visual to enjoy.

[6] *All About Love*, bell hooks (1999)

[7] *Medusa: How the Literary Muse Became an Emblem for Feminism*, Beverly Tan (2020)

er we look, we will see these power-structures, the inequality, the objectification. Still, there is a lot less light shown on the internalization of these beliefs within women. How, even though we know better, we sometimes look at ourselves as an object. A spectacle. A sight. How we also own the male gaze, how it lives inside of us.

The Surveyor and the Surveyed

From a very young age we, women, are taught to think of ourselves as if we are perceived by men. As John Berger said in *Ways of Seeing* (1972):

“[The woman] comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another.”

The surveyor of woman within herself is male, the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object — and most particularly an object of vision, a sight. [8] Nevertheless, women are in no way allowed to enjoy this visual pleasure themselves without scrutiny. Berger also mentioned this hypocrisy, stating: “You paint a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand, and you call the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure.” [9] Or, as Audre Lorde wrote: “On the one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority; on the other hand, women have been made to suffer and feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence.” [10] This leads to a performance that is not necessarily pleasurable for the one performing. It’s not a true expression of self, but a version created to serve the needs of others. One that is highly curated, executed to perfection. This process of self-objectification [11], where the objectifying gaze is turned inward, occurs in various amounts, and is often a quite subconscious act. However, it has grave effects, making women, to an extent, participate in the reaffirmation of patriarchal gender roles and believes.

[8] *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger (1972)

[9] *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger (1972)

[10] *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, Audre Lorde (1978)

[11] When I am talking about self-objectification, I’m talking about seeing yourself as an object of vision, not necessarily an object that can be used.

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To make matters worse, referring back to the quote by Margaret Atwood, even pretending you aren’t catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy. There is no escaping the male gaze, as everything will be appropriated by it. Rebellious against it, only reaffirms the presence of the patriarchal societal norms, creating an unbreakable vicious circle. Deciding not to shave your armpits, because you do not want to cater to the visual pleasure of men, is still a confirmation of its powers. Pretending you’re unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, is still an implicit confirmation of the ideology of the status quo. [12]

[12] *A Denial of Difference: Theories of Cinematic Identification*, Anne Friedberg (1989)

Gazing, Looking and Seeing

There is a big difference between our ways of seeing, although there seems to be no general definition of the terms. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish these, since they establish a relationship with the person on the receiving end, whether that be the Other or the Self. Some theorists make a distinction between the gaze and the look: suggesting that the look is a perceptual mode open to all, whilst the gaze is a mode of viewing reflecting a gendered code of desire. [13] This will inevitably lead to the objectification of the gazed upon. Elizabeth Grosz argued:

[13] *The Gaze Revisited, Or Reviewing Queer Viewings*, Caroline Evans & Lorraine Gamman (1995)

“Many feminists ... have conflated the look with the gaze, mistaking a perceptual mode with a mode of desire. When they state baldly that “vision” is male, the look is masculine, or the visual is a phallogocentric mode of perception, these feminists confuse a perceptual facility open to both sexes ... with sexually coded positions of desire within visual (or any other perceptual) functions ... vision is not, cannot be, masculine ... rather, certain ways of using vision (for example, to objectify) may confirm and help produce patriarchal power relations.” [14]

[14] *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*, Elizabeth Grosz (1992)

A further distinction can be made between looking and seeing. Looking could be considered the conscious form of taking in the world around us through sight. Whereas seeing is our default setting, that automatically occurs when we open our eyes. Whilst describing looking versus seeing, photographer B. Ingrid Olson stated:

“Looking at something is a conscious act, it is directed, cognitive, and often involves some degree of explication, or evaluation of whatever is in front of you. Conversely, the

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sensation of sight is often subconscious, sometimes unfocused, and is an automatic experience as a sighted person with eyes open.”[15]

While the act of seeing, looking and gazing can be differently defined, the same goes for when you are the subject of this act of sight. There is a big difference between being looked at and being seen. [16] When we see another, it is not just the external of them that we’re referring to, we see the whole entirety of a person. It further implies interaction, an active involvement of both parties. But this type of seeing is not really possible without a personal connection to the subject, so to claim that we can truly see a person when photographed is very questionable, and the main downfall regarding the female gaze. There perhaps is no such thing as a subject in mediums so reductive as photography, solely an object of vision.

The Female Gaze

Often in contemporary culture, anything made by a woman is labelled as the female gaze. She is a woman, after all, so how can it be objectifying or coded for the visual pleasure of men? This label has become a marketing tool rather than an actual technique of capturing and seeing. Operating as a seemingly easy fix. But this doesn’t consider the environment all women grow up in. A culture where the objectification of women is so normalized we barely even recognize it when it occurs. So how can we assume that a woman, purely because of her gender, would not be complicit or partaking in such a culture?

Going further than an individual’s part in upholding the male gaze and the overall unattainability of a separate gaze, is the fact that while living in a patriarchy, regardless of the actions, it will always be beneficial for men, and men only. As photographer Cammie Toloui said: “If it’s still within the framework of the typical, patriarchal expectations of beauty and sexual imagery [...] it’s still about pleasing men”. Thus, all dominant images are basically male constructs. Furthermore, as long as there is a literal power imbalance, this will always be reflected in our ways of seeing. Recognizing this has led many to say that it is impossible to know what the “feminine” might be, outside male constructs [17], making it impossible to understand what a female gaze could be. Also adding to this lack of understanding, is the erasure of anyone other than cisgender, heterosexual, white woman while describing a female gaze. You cannot speak of a universal female gaze when previous models of the gaze have produced some very one-dimensional

[15] *Why Photography: New Visions*, B. Ingrid Olson (2020)

[16] *Open Water*, Caleb Azumah Nelson (2021)

[17] *Is the Gaze Male*, E. Ann Kaplan (1983)

accounts of viewing relations. [18] It is certain that gender influences any experience, and would ultimately shape the way we see, as does any identity. Being a woman is therefore a crucial part of it, leading to a so-called female perspective. However, this can not exclude the influences of other identities. There is no singular female gaze, only parallel experiences. There can be no generalized term to describe a universal way of seeing, nor one that is solely defined by gender.

So perhaps, it shouldn’t be about gaining a new gaze, or giving the female gaze more authority. It should be about being critical of our existing ways of seeing: questioning them; deconstructing them. The male gaze itself is only a small consequence originating from a larger systematic problem. It therefore cannot be countered, or undone, by simply making it “female”, while remaining to uphold the current system. We need feminists critique because we need to understand how it is the world takes shape by restricting the forms in which we see... we need this critique now, if we are to learn how not to reproduce what we inherit. [19] And a crucial part of this critique is to also look inwards. To be critical of our own ways of seeing and how we, at times, are unconsciously controlled by the internalized ideologies of the male gaze. How it lives on within us. Recognizing the complexity of looking within systems of power, and about being a looking and consuming body within that [20]. Not only affecting how we see others, but also how we look at ourselves.

At first, the confrontation with my self-objectification was difficult to deal with, causing a hyper-awareness of everything around me, and becoming extremely conscious of the gaze I laid upon myself. Gradually, as I grew more informed and familiar with the related theory, it helped to give words to feelings I’ve had for as long as I remember. There is no easy fix for objectification, but the realization and contextualization has made me able to address my own thoughts and correct them accordingly. While recognizing them, I take away their power over me. By acknowledging that it’s the man inside of me telling me what to do, I can stand up to him, facing the fact that he is not me, and therefore has no right to control me. I might still consider myself as an object at times, but no longer am I blindly following these thoughts and impulses. [21] —————

[18] *The Gaze Revisited, Or Reviewing Queer Viewings*, Caroline Evans & Lorraine Gamman (1995)

[19] *Making Feminist Points*, Sara Ahmed (2013)

[20] *Victoria Sin*

[21] As is previously discovered, the experience of the male gaze is highly differential between people and intersecting identities. Therefore, I cannot speak of a general, only a personal experience and one-sided perspective. It should not be concluded as a singular truth.

“The woman who checks her makeup half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara run, who worries that the wind or rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle, or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of the panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self-committed to a relentless self-surveillance.”

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