

Cinema's Male Gaze as a Window into the Psychology of Self Objectification

Corinn Rossitter

MOPA 409: Visual Theory

Michael Thoma

December 15th 2020

“Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or down on your knees, it's all a male fantasy: that you're strong enough to take what they dish out, or else too weak to do anything about it. Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside, watching a woman. You are your own voyeur.”

-Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride*

In her essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey contextualizes the dominant hegemonic force of the cinema's lens as a result of male domination in every outlet of society in the 20th century. This essay will analyze cinema's "male gaze" through a Marxist critique, expose the banality of the male gaze as an ideological state apparatus, explore how we are affected psychologically by the male gaze, and poke some holes in how we think we successfully cope with it as individuals. Being aware of the male gaze as a dominant hegemonic force does not remove us from the psychological affects of it; however, recognition of it, revolutionarily grants us access to why we feel the way we do. Once this is fully realized, the real work can begin.

First, the idea of the male gaze must be defined. The male gaze is a greater, more abstract idea than it just simply being the sum of *men plus looking*. Mulvey's writing explores how the producer of film (meaning director, writer, cinematographer, etc.), the audience of a film, and the protagonist in the film, all facilitate the construction of women as objects and targets of voyeurism. Now, there is an argument to be made that anything portrayed on film acts as the process of objectification, and that is a fair argument to be made, but incomplete. The problem that Mulvey indicates is that this sexual objectification is currently, and historically, not a two-way street. The power imbalance between men and women in the early 20th century was extreme, and so, these imbalances transferred over to the filmic language in the early development of it. Because of this bad foundation, the male gaze is essentially baked into the language of cinema. This subsequently reinforces the imbalance for the consumers and the next generation.

This idea of consumerism moulding our own priorities, goals, and way we view our value, is a staple in any Marxist analysis. In Heidi Hartmann's essay *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union*, she argues that all people,

regardless of their hierarchical status, are interpolated through systemic means into obeying and accepting the male gaze, because the patriarchy supports capitalism¹. Even though this is not explicitly stated in traditional Marxist texts, “like Capitalism, Marxism is not inclusive of women in its analyses of economic systems; however, seen through a feminist lens, Marxism offers a means for understanding gendered power dynamics—Marxism’s omission of these dynamics in and of itself is an example of these imbalances at work.”² The insidious thing about this kind of cultural hegemony is that it is even more undetectable to the untrained eye than say for example, class consciousness is. It is not the 1% ruling class manipulating the 99% working class into thinking they are the problem. The male gaze, as dominant cultural force, is a problem in which 50% of the population is unaware of its effects (because it was made to cater to them) and the other 50% (having no social power to begin with) are being gaslit into believing their discomfort with an omnipresent male gaze is an individual one, not a universal problem. All this dynamic is occurring while the 1% still benefits from the results of a disenfranchised population distracted on identity issues rather than class issues. In *Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward a Feminist Jurisprudence*, Catherine MacKinnon punctually expresses this dilemma by stating, “Male dominance is perhaps the most pervasive and tenacious system of power in history. Its point of view is the standard for point-of-viewlessness, its particularity the meaning of universality”³

¹ Heidi I. Hartmann. *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union*. Capital & Class 3, no. 2. 1979. pp.1–33.

² Danielle S. Moskowitz. *Margaret Atwood's "Rape Fantasies": A Rape Culture Commentary*. Long Island University, The Brooklyn Center. 2016.

³ Catharine A. MacKinnon. *Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence*. Signs vol. 8, no. 4. 1983. pp. 638.

The affect the gaze has on women psychologically will be explored more further along in this essay, but there is still something to be said about approaching this vast societal problem through a Marxist lens. In recent years there has been a body positivity movement and calls from activists to reclaim your body. However, this does not necessarily deal with the main issue of the male gaze. Being confident in your body does not erase the power dynamic that the male gaze in media upholds. So even when women try to act against the male gaze, there is a sort of instant recuperation of the movement. To quote Margaret Atwood, “Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy.” This begs the question, is it truly a free choice or coerced? Like capitalism, if a person completely rejects the mode of production and chooses to not be exploited for their labor, they risk homelessness, starvation, and death. In regards to the male gaze, women can either conform to it (whether that be mindlessly, or as a tactic for survival) or reject it and still be haunted by their societally engrained third person male perspective. This may seem like not a true rejection, but the fact of the matter is that due to,

Centuries of socialisation of [the male gaze] as the norm, [it] has an insidious effect on female psychology and coaxes women to adopt a view of their personal self that best aligns with and pleases male voyeurs. This has seriously stunted any attempts at reclamation of beauty standards from patriarchy and instead contributes to the rise of self-objectification. Self-objectification in close collaboration with an internalised male gaze, ultimately cloaks itself as the perfectly undetectable Trojan horse of patriarchy.⁴

⁴ Halima Zoha Ansari, et al. *An Enquiry Into Internalised Male Gaze: Whose Camera Is It Anyway?*. Feminism In India. 3 Dec. 2020.

It is inescapable because it is the dominant way in which we view not only the women on screen, but women off screen, and ourselves, even when nobody is watching us, and we have no one to preform for other than the omnipresent male voyeur that has been engrained into our psyche.

We can now see how the male gaze operates as an ideological state apparatus, so this begs the question, why is it still spectacted and glorified as something that is cutting edge and shocking to audiences? Debra Beattie argues this is because the male gaze embodies the “cinema of cruelty”⁵. She uses Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), as an extreme example of this gravitation towards cruelty for the sake of the spectacle guised as “authenticity”. In the production of this movie, it has been admitted by Bertolucci and Marlon Brando on record that the notorious rape scene was not in the script, and they surprised the actress Maria Schneider during the shoot with the brutal scene, making the scene not only a depiction of rape, but a real sexual assault caught on camera that won multiple Academy Awards. In 2013 while speaking of the production of the scene Bertolucci stated,

But I've been, in a way, horrible to Maria, because I didn't tell her what was going on, because I wanted her reaction as a girl, not as an actress. I wanted her to react humiliated, if it goes on, she shouts, "No, no!", and I think that she hated me, and also Marlon, because we didn't tell her...⁶

This justification of wanting a “real reaction” treats women on screen, and in real life, as sick experiment. He also goes on to describe *Last Tango in Paris* as “the ‘most political film he has ever done’ although he does admit that none of the characters discuss politics.”⁷ Making a spectacle out of the male gaze is nothing new and not revolutionary or edgy, but it has been

⁵ Beattie, Debra. *The Potential for Excess in the Toxic Nature of Gendered Power in the Production of Cinema*. Hecate, vol. 42. 2016, pp. 128.

⁶ Debra Beattie.

⁷ Debra Beattie.

conflated and so intertwined with the spectacle of the cinema for so long, that it is hard to have recognized great work of cinema without having the other. This further exemplifies it as the status quo, to be accepted by the masses, including women.

If something as extreme as the above example can fly under the radar, it is clear that the various ways in which the male gaze persists is pervasive, and rarely called out. From Laura Mulvey, to intersectional film critics in 2020, people are beginning to pull at the thread of this underlying issue. But before we decide how to address the issue at hand, the internalization of the male gaze needs to be made conscious, or else we risk yet another case of recuperation.

In the article *An Enquiry Into Internalised Male Gaze: Whose Camera Is It Anyway?*, the writers argue that “conformity to an internalised male gaze is not empowerment. Recognition of such internalisation is.”⁸ Simone De Beauvoir also questions “how one’s image can ever be a decidedly private experience when socialisation of the sexes is dictated by patriarchy and women are acculturated to internalise an observer’s perspective as a primary view of their physical self.”⁹ While simply educating people to recognize the male gaze seems like an easy fix, it does not actually change the structures that uphold it and the affects it has on individuals. There is a certain cognitive dissonance that occurs when women know they are comparing themselves to unrealistic beauty standards or personality archetypes, but still somehow pine to live up to them. This is because when,

one is socialised into this phallogocentric order, it becomes increasingly difficult to identify acts that one does for ‘oneself’ and acts that one is unconsciously coerced into performing. Viewing oneself as an object that needs to be admired, or worse disguising

⁸ Halima Zoha Ansari, et al.

⁹ Halima Zoha Ansari, et al.

this need as independent from an internalised male gaze in order to grasp for any real sense of control in a society.¹⁰

From a Freudian perspective, this could be described as a “defense neuroses” or in other words “defense mechanisms [that] are caused by anxiety-producing thoughts that are too overwhelming for one’s mind to confront.”¹¹ So because of the unsurmountable foundation of over a century of the male gaze being promoted as the only gaze in cinema, many women will convince themselves they *like* to cater to it as an internal defense mechanism because there is not really any other option. As stated earlier, this becomes especially a problem with recuperation because women in media who are in some positions of power can end up also furthering the spread of the male gaze.

To make matters more complicated, this internalized male gaze, also known as “selfgaze”, “[leads] to a higher state self-objectification than female and male gazes”¹², so in a way the damage is already done even if the external male gaze vanishes tomorrow. It also causes “anxiety about [womens] appearance and physical safety, along with reduced mindfulness of internal bodily cues, and decreased ability to focus on immediate mental or physical pursuits”¹³. How can we expect women directors, writers, and cinematographers, who are subject to these psychological effects of decreased ability to focus on mental/physical pursuits, to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and shoulder the burden of balancing out the endless content that relies on the male gaze? It is a “catch-22” because we need people to be free of the

¹⁰ Halima Zoha Ansari, et al.

¹¹ Danielle S. Moskowitz.

¹² Tugba Yilmaz and Özlem Bozo. *Whose Gaze Is More Objectifying? An Experimental Study of College Women’s State Self-Objectification, Body Shame, Negative Mood, and Body Dissatisfaction*. Mediterranean Journal of Clinical Psychology. 2019.

¹³ Tara Well. *Taking Back the Male Gaze*. Psychology Today. Nov 6 2017.

constraints of the male gaze in order for it to not influence content production; but also, the male gaze originated from media, so we need a pop-culture that lacks it in order to normalize not having it internally. The narrative and lens of women on screen will not be changed until actual material conditions are equalized between the genders on society as a whole.

Based on the information presented, it can be substantially argued that putting a woman in the directors' chair, while a good thing in regards to gender pay parity, does not change the establishment and indoctrination of the male gaze in the vast media landscape, or even her own media she produces. Without intense analysis and work on-mass, including those of every gender and rank in socioeconomic pecking order, individual women will not be able to overcome the internalized male gaze. Women can perpetuate the male gaze onto others and onto themselves just as much as men can in our current societal construction. This may seem like a negative thing, but ultimately the understanding that women having a seat at the table is only the first step, is actually an incredible revelation to have, because it detokenizes women in film production and makes it something that we can all work towards.

References

- Ansari, Halima Zoha, et al. *An Enquiry Into Internalised Male Gaze: Whose Camera Is It Anyway?*. Feminism In India. 3 Dec. 2020. feminisminindia.com/2020/10/14/male-gaze-camera-internalized-patriarchy/.
- Beattie, Debra. *The Potential for Excess in the Toxic Nature of Gendered Power in the Production of Cinema*. Hecate, vol. 42. 2016, pp. 128.
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A518741397/GLS?u=nort83486&sid=GLS&xid=362d9cda>
- Hartmann, Heidi I. *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union*. Capital & Class 3, no. 2. 1979. pp.1–33.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/030981687900800102>.
- Karsay, Kathrin, et al. *Adopting the Objectifying Gaze: Exposure to Sexually Objectifying Music Videos and Subsequent Gazing Behavior*. Media Psychology. 2018. <https://search-ebshost-com.ezproxy.capilanou.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edb&AN=126756963&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
- MacKinnon, Catharine A. *Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence*. Signs vol. 8, no. 4. 1983. pp. 638. <https://search-ebshost-com.ezproxy.capilanou.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.3173687&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
- Moskowitz, Danielle S. *Margaret Atwood's "Rape Fantasies": A Rape Culture Commentary*. Long Island University, The Brooklyn Center. 2016.
<https://ezproxy.capilanou.ca/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.capilanou.ca/dissertations-theses/margaret-atwoods-rape-fantasies-culture/docview/1837094705/se2?accountid=36786>.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" In *Media and Cultural Studies*:

Keywords. Edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner. Blackwell. 2006. pp. 342–352.

Well, Tara. *Taking Back the Male Gaze*. Psychology Today. Nov 6 2017.

www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/the-clarity/201711/taking-back-the-male-gaze.

Yilmaz, Tugba and Özlem Bozo. *Whose Gaze Is More Objectifying? An Experimental Study of*

College Women's State Self-Objectification, Body Shame, Negative Mood, and Body

Dissatisfaction. Mediterranean Journal of Clinical Psychology. 2019. <https://eds-a->

[ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.capilanou.ca/eds/detail/detail?vid=14&sid=7f7e07df-b3e9-4b64](https://eds-a-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.capilanou.ca/eds/detail/detail?vid=14&sid=7f7e07df-b3e9-4b64)

[9df7-b6a3b9f55f10%40sdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmUmc2](https://eds-a-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.capilanou.ca/eds/detail/detail?vid=14&sid=7f7e07df-b3e9-4b64)

[NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=edsdoj.80f47bb3a8574ffba45ab15637ade59b&db=edsdoj](https://eds-a-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.capilanou.ca/eds/detail/detail?vid=14&sid=7f7e07df-b3e9-4b64)

Film & Books Referenced

Last Tango in Paris (1972) - Bernardo Bertolucci

The Robber Bride (Published 1993) - Margaret Atwood