

Changing Perspectives: An Examination of the Male and Female Gaze

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Changing Perspectives: An Examination of the Male and Female Gaze

1 Introduction

Objectification and sexualization, perception distortion, and the existence of sexism, toxicity, and anti-feminist beliefs have dominated the art and media industries since Laura Mulvey introduced the term "the male gaze" in her 1973 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." My experience as a female photographer who predominantly works with female models and self-portraiture has given me insight into how conception may impact perception. The essence of feminism as well as the hypersexualization that occurs in the fashion photography industry influenced a recent series that I created. This series brought attention to problems associated with photographers taking advantage of and exploiting female models during photoshoots, as well as how this behavior is routinely disregarded and accepted as normal. This body of work has been met with a variety of responses, with some viewers believing that the goal of the photos depicting a woman posing in a bikini was to sexualize women for the benefit of male viewers. However, other people interpreted it as a representation of feminism in the context of the female gaze. They believed that a woman shouldn't be made to feel ashamed of her body, and they protested the inappropriate behavior. The response I received from the audience prompted me to investigate the male and female gaze and its effects. I came to the realization that when an artist conceptualizes an idea, they assume the authority of the narrative. They are the originators of the work; therefore, it contains their ideas, principles, aspirations, and beliefs (whether those are controversial or not). As it is easy to succumb to society's norms and

justifications, a photographer's freedom to build their notions must be complemented by self-discipline and knowledge to accurately depict the female body from a female viewpoint. This paper focuses on the essay written by Laura Mulvey and highlights her definitions of the male and female gaze, as well as the negative influence of the male gaze and how one may shift perspective from the male to the female gaze.

2 Laura Mulvey's Feminist Theories

Laura Mulvey's 1973 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" introduces and revolutionizes the theory of "the male gaze," suggesting that a gender imbalance is a controlling power in film. She claims that the term indicates two sorts of pleasure: "scopophilia" and the "narcissistic" pleasure of "identification" with the male protagonist (or from the camera's perspective). The male gaze has been depicted in a variety of aesthetic forms in media and art. She says that throughout history, males have had a monopoly on what they wanted to see in visual art and what they did not want to see in visual art since men created the majority of it. As a result, she believes males have developed an artistic tradition in which they enjoy viewing women in passive roles. This feminist theory discusses how the male gaze influences society's messages to young girls, such as the assumption that they must be attractive to attract the attention of men, while teaching young men that it is OK to view women as sex objects. In "The Female Gaze: Simply, What Is It? | by Daila Ayala | Sociomix," Daila Ayala stresses Laura Mulvey's essay. She says that, as a culture, we have been controlled by a predominantly male perspective on the world, and that we should examine the female perspective because this dominant perspective lacks understanding and appreciation for it. Laura Mulvey summarizes

how the masculine gaze functions and who and what it effects in film through three points. The three aspects of a film are the camera, the audience, and the characters. Formerly known as Jill Soloway, Joey Soloway transformed these three elements into three fundamental principles: Feeling Seeing, The Gazed Gaze, and Returning the Gaze. Feeling Seeing implies that by making the camera subjective, they use the frame to evoke a feeling of in-feeling instead of gazing at the character, causing the viewer to feel what the characters feel. The Gazed Gaze indicates that the story's elements communicate to the viewer how it feels to be the object of the gaze. Returning the Gaze entails that the person who was previously the object says, "I notice you looking at me, and I no longer want to be the object; I want to be the subject so that I can make you the object." These principles allow the story to make the audience feel as if they are the ones being observed as if they are objects themselves (Ayala 2020).

The strength of Mulvey's theory is that she allows for a female perspective on the idea, it is easily applicable to different forms of art and media, and it adapted itself well to the silent film era when action was constrained due to the actor being superimposed onto the backdrop (forcing the female body to be shown more). However, her argument is founded on psychoanalysis (which has subsequently been found to be flawed), the premise that people must identify with the males in films, and the implication that the majority of people would not grasp and comprehend the depictions portrayed in films. In opposition to the male gaze theory, Mulvey proposed the feminist theory of "the female gaze," which has since been advocated by many artists (male and female) to bring about the necessary change to empower women and establish equal media representation. The female gaze encourages viewers to appreciate the female characters as an equal part of the narrative rather than as subservient characters subject to the male gaze. But to alter perception, you must be aware of what the male gaze is, its history, and how various media

and works of art have shaped it.

3 Impact of the Male Gaze

The beauty standards that both men and women are expected to live up to have a detrimental effect on individuals and are primarily designed with the male gaze in mind. In an article titled "The Male Gaze vs. Female Gaze - an Injustice!," Karolina Wilde discusses the female and male gaze. She focuses on where the male gaze can be seen, the beauty standards of women and how they cater to the male gaze, and how the male gaze establishes beauty standards for men. In addition, she examines how the female gaze establishes beauty standards for women. As a direct result of beauty standards, an increasing number of men and women are suffering from low self-esteem and a lack of confidence, which is inflicting long-term damage on their mental health.

The concept of the ideal female and male has been fabricated by society; women "should be" curvy but not fat, or the opposite: extremely thin, with flawless white skin, hair, and nails, and men "should be" strong and protective, athletic, and also have flawless white skin. This happens quite frequently on social media platforms, as algorithms direct users to the posts and "influencers" who have the most engagement. This creates a false narrative that exemplifies sexism, racism, fatphobia, homophobia, and ableism. The list of problematic attitudes perpetuated by social media is virtually endless. What they believe women want is not what we actually desire to see or be. Wilde believes that the typical female perception of men and the way men look at women are opposites of one another. "Women desire men who attend therapy, are upfront and honest about their emotions, are not embarrassed to cuddle, and seek emotional

consolation," the author states in her article. They are looking for men whose masculinity is not diminished by a feminine appearance (Wilde 2021). In her article, "Yes, There Is Such a Thing as a 'Female Gaze,'" Stefani Forster also makes the argument that the female gaze is an actual thing, but it's not what you think. The overrepresentation of men in the media and the male gaze is seen so frequently that they are taken for granted. But the reality is quite different. Forster presents a biased viewpoint by asserting that both men and women are objectified in the media, specifically in film. She rebuts their argument by pointing out that it "does not take into account how regularly women are presented as sexual objects," which she argues is problematic (Forster 2018). I would have to agree with Forster and Wilde based on my personal experience of objectification by men in real life, as well as on social media.

“Evidence for an Association between Men’s Spontaneous Objectifying Gazing Behavior and Their Endorsement of Objectifying Attitudes toward Women” provides self-reports and studies that were conducted to support the claim of men’s objectification of women, showing moderate associations between men's gaze behavior and endorsement of sexually objectifying attitudes. Bareket, Orly, Nurit Schnabel, Dekel Abeles, Sarah Gervais, and Shlomit Yuval-Greenberg introduce their term of measurement ‘the objectifying gaze’ as being the time spent staring at women’s bodies versus their faces. One of the studies utilizes the objectifying gaze by exposing participants, both male, and female, to images of females appearing “highly sexualized”. The images were shown and the viewer’s eye movements were tracked. Gervais discovered that participants spent a greater amount of time examining the physical appearance of the ladies compared to those who evaluated their personalities. The results found that participants showed greater attention to looking at sexual body parts, such as the breasts, versus non-sexual body parts. Another study was done, also using eye tracking as a form of measure. The

participants sat in a room and were instructed to read computerized instructions. They were asked to look at photos of people that only appear for a few seconds and then give a general impression of said person in the image, having to answer quickly. They were shown test photos first then ten images of clothed women and ten images of clothed men. Table 1 shows the statistics and correlations for the study variables. There were three regions of interest: the face, chest, and waist to the hip area. Set 1 involved showing standardized photographs as a test run, showing average times looking at the images. Set 2 shows a great difference in sexual objectification in comparison to set 1. This study lends credence to the idea of female objectification and provides evidence that men are the most significant factor in determining how women are seen (Bareket, Orly, Nurit Schnabel, Dekel Abeles, Sarah Gervais, and Shlomit Yuval-Greenberg 2018).

Sex Roles

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables

Variables	Dwell time			Dwell time differences against face		
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Range	<i>r</i> with self-reported objectification	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Range	<i>r</i> with self-reported objectification
(a) Set 1 (standardized photographs)						
Face	2608.96 (761.60)	243.57–4382.56	-.33**	0	0	–
Chest	1031.73 (479.17)	.00–2204.50	.19	-1577.23 (1136.90)	-4201.44–1198.20	.30*
Waist-to-hip	487.73 (467.07)	.00–3110.86	.25*	-2121.23 (1141.88)	-4382.56–2867.29	.33*
Body	1522.83 (725.79)	69.10–3930.29	.29*	-1086.13 (1448.01)	-4201.44–3686.71	.32*
(b) Set 2 (realistic photographs)						
Face	2736.43 (780.17)	1082.00–4550.08	-.34**	0	0	–
Chest	642.50 (359.81)	33.47–1689.43	.10	-2093.93 (1031.30)	-4454.68–252.36	.29*
Waist-to-hip	537.48 (380.91)	40.70–2249.87	.30*	-2198.95 (1092.25)	-4509.00–1167.87	.34**
Body	1353.54 (623.00)	74.14–2967.53	.30*	-1382.89 (1368.01)	-4413.60–1885.53	.33*

n = 61. *r* with self-reported objectification refers to the correlations between Men's Objectification of Women measure and all dwell times (raw and difference scores). For Men's Objectification of Women, the scale ranged from 1 to 5 (*M* = 2.72, *SD* = .61, actual range = 1.06 to 4.17). Dwell times are in milliseconds. Dwell time differences are calculated as the difference between dwell times of sexual body parts and faces. Body dwell time is calculated as the sum of dwell times for the chest, waist-to-hip, and legs (not including the feet area)

p* < .05. *p* < .01

Table 1

Descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables

Besides hypersexualization, female celebrities in the media are depicted in a childish or even prepubescent manner. The term "woman-child" is defined in the book "Picturing the Woman-Child: Fashion, Feminism, and the Female Gaze" by Laing as "a normative depiction of femininity that is often white, thin, hetero-normative, and able-bodied." Katy Perry, Zoey Deschanel, and Nicki Minaj are just a few well-known celebrities who are excellent examples of the "woman-child clothing style" (Laing, 2021). Which message does this send to society as a whole? Is the concept of the "woman child" responsible for the perversion and sexual objectification of women? Another misleading depiction of the female body was developed only for the goal of appealing to men.

4 Shifting Perspectives to the Female Gaze

It is important for artists working in all mediums, but especially photography, fashion, and film, to develop more utilization of the female gaze. Mulvey proposed the so-called feministic idea of 'the female gaze' in opposition to the male gaze theory, which has since been championed by many male and female artists in an effort to empower women and assure equal representation in media and art. Emil Prakertia Raji, a photographer, writes in his article titled "Personal Photography and the Male Gaze" that photographers whose work is influenced by personal experience are enmeshed in the process of confounding "their inalienable feeling of love by enforcing gender binaries in the process." Raji's argument is presented in the context of his work as a photographer. After being told his work was 'very masculine, he took it as an opportunity to understand his role as a male photographer depicting the female body. Photographers need to be mindful of the male gaze and educate themselves on gender studies,

culture, and other ideologies if they want to enhance the work they produce (Raji 2017).

In addition, in the article titled "The Female Gaze and Changing Attitudes in Fashion Photography," *Mess Magazine* expresses the opinion that the female gaze should be utilized in fashion photography more frequently to initiate a change in attitudes regarding the fashion industry and fashion photography. They discuss the long-standing connection between fashion photography, hypersexualized models, and stereotypically masculine imagery. *Mess Magazine* describes how the female gaze has moved away from hypersexualization and is now producing alluring but not sexualized visuals. They believe that the female gaze is an "interesting" concept because it challenges the notions that society and the fashion industry have about what a woman should look like and how distinctively different each person is (*Mess Magazine*, 2021).

Now is the time to improve these movements and expand their collective influence by directly fighting the supremacy of elite white men. Already, these movements have permeated public discourse and laid the framework for a developing political consciousness among the general public. This political consciousness will disclose the universally detrimental repercussions of anti-Black prejudice, patriarchy, and exploitative capitalism. The current consciousness will serve as the foundation for a genuine cross-racial, -gender, -class, -sexual position, -religion, -nationality, and ability movement committed to ending elite white male supremacy if we do not apologize for our beliefs. If we do not apologize for our beliefs, the current consciousness will serve as the foundation for this movement. Even though we have a long way to go, the once-omnipresent human gaze is gradually becoming less pervasive even if we have had a long time to get started. During this time of #MeToo and #AskHerMore, women are speaking up more than ever before, and their voices are getting the attention they deserve.

And perhaps, with more female artists at the helm, there will be a bigger probability that the female gaze will be prioritized and find a place in media.

5 Conclusion

The male gaze, which is a historically inaccurate image of women that was formed by elite white men, has advanced to objectify and sexualize the bodies of women. The sexist, toxic, and anti-feminist attitudes that underpin the false representation that is presented by the media are the root cause of the issue. If we make an effort to promote the female point of view, there is a chance that we will be able to stop the cycle of violence that is caused by the utilization of the male gaze and prevent the recurrence of past events. This can begin with the education of children through inclusive sexual education in schools or by supporting female directors, artists, etc. One way to support female directors is through the Alliance of Women Directors. The Association of Women Directors (AWD) is a non-profit organization dedicated to increasing the number of qualified female and gender non-binary directors working in the entertainment business. Having done some research on the topic, I believe that I am able to comprehend the logic that underpins the male gaze; despite this, I am of the opinion that there is a requirement for further study to be carried out. I also think that educating children is the first step in the process of changing people's perspectives, and that this change is something that can be achieved. But the individual is by far the most important factor to consider.

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