The female gaze
by Mia Engberg

Is there such a thing as a *female gaze*?
Is this a special way of looking at the world?
Is it a cinematic genre or an ethical stance?
Is the *female gaze* inherently non-voyeuristic and non-objectifying?

Within the term “female gaze” lies a utopian notion that there is enough room for other perspectives, not only the dominant one. It is the dream of another cinema, another world in which art is not performed for, or at the expense of the other. Or, does the notion of a female gaze actually conceal a desire, a longing for a shift of power, a revenge for thousands of years of patriarchal privilege? A will to objectify other bodies, conquer new territories?

I use the term "female gaze" with caution. I am skeptical of the epithet "female filmmaker" which is given to me in various contexts; I find it limits me rather than describes me. While my films perhaps represent an "other", a non-dominant aesthetic – reflecting my specific experience of being human – my identity is composed of countless layers and my gender is only one of them. And what exactly is a woman? Regardless of whether we use the narrow delineation of cis-woman or a broader definition in which a woman is a person who identifies as a woman, the group consists of half of the global population. Is there really *a* gaze that can be said to represent all of us?

Let's approach this thought again, but from a different direction. *What is voyeurism?* The dictionary says that voyeurism is "the practice of obtaining sexual gratification by looking at sexual objects or acts, especially secretively." [1] So, put simply, voyeurism is the pleasure of looking. More specifically, the pleasure of looking at "sexual objects."

Laura Mulvey links voyeurism to the male gaze, writing that the film industry reflects a patriarchal order and commonly addresses an imagined male spectator.

Patriarchal voyeurism is of course not exclusive to the cinematic medium; it can be said to equally apply to visual (western) art, which (with a few exceptions) has been created with, through and for the male gaze throughout history. Men have been artists, financiers and audience; women have been models. Or, as John Berger puts it in *Ways of Seeing*:

> Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.[2]

In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey uses the psychoanalytical theories of Freud and Lacan to decode the cinematic language she calls "the patriarchal unconscious." Freud wasn't exactly a feminist, and his theories can be seen as fairly straightforward in terms of his obsession with who has a penis and who doesn't.[3] Mulvey sees traditional phallocentric psychoanalysis as a perfect instrument for illustrating ways in which the voyeuristic male gaze permeates cinematic language. As she writes:

> Psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriated here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form.[4]

Mulvey discusses two fundamental concepts she sees as related to pleasure in narrative film: *scopophilia*, pleasure in secretly looking and objectifying what one sees; and *narcissism* (mirror stage), pleasure in identifying with the active character, the subject, of the film.

According to Freudian theory, scopophilia, or the desire to watch secretly, is one of the fundamental male sexual instincts, linked to the desire to objectify the other and to control with one's gaze. According to Mulvey, narrative film is the perfect medium for satisfying scopophiliac desires, the darkness of the cinema gives the spectator anonymity and the film creates an illusion of secretly watching a private world. This is in contrast to the theater, where the spectator and the actors are together in a shared physical space. She also points out that this pleasure has privileged the male gaze, that the woman, lacking a phallus, has traditionally been assigned the role of the objectified other.

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure and she is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.[5]

Mulvey demonstrates the way film expands scopophilia via narcissism: satisfaction through identification with the image. She departs from Lacan's theories of the mirror stage – the developmental stage in which a child first sees itself in a mirror and creates an ego. In traditional psychoanalytic theory, the woman represents a threat to the man because she lacks a phallus. One way to deal with this fear is to objectify her with one's gaze, another way is to identify with the male hero who either conquers or saves the woman, rendering her harmless.

> What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.[6]

One example of this is bromance films, which Mulvey calls "buddy movies," in which the homoerotic tension between two men – often police officers –contains the story. The woman has been rendered superfluous; if women are represented, it is as tiresome ex-wife or mutilated, raped female body –frequently a sex worker – who has been found in a ditch. This gives rise to an exciting investigation in which the two men dedicate themselves to tracking down another man, fascinated by his sadistic deeds and his analyzing his clever moves in great detail. (see *True Detective, Seven, Twin Peaks etc*).

Should voyeuristic pleasure be considered "male" by nature, and the tendency or capacity to be submissive, to "be seen" be characterized as "female"? Is the male gaze the prerequisite for voyeurism? No. Voyeurism is not gendered. I propose that voyeurism is linked to power. The person with the power has the possibility and the privilege to objectify others. A female gaze can be voyeuristic and objectify others if the power structure in which she is currently situated allows for it.

As white women gain more power in the western world, more films and TV series are being produced that utilize a white, female gaze. An example is the TV series Sex & the City, in which four privileged white women go shopping, go on dates and hang out. Here, *others* are objectified and exotified: a young boyfriend, a black lover and his racist and aggressive sister, a fiery Latin American dyke, etc. The series *Big Little Lies* is based similarly on a group of primarily white women, depicting their world view. The female characters here are active subjects who carry the narrative forward from the common perspective of white, well-off, American woman. The only deviation from this norm is the character Bonnie, whose black mother (her father is white) is depicted as exotic (she practices some kind of voodoo) and violent (she is the only mother in the series who subjects her child to both physical and psychological abuse). While the series has been praised for its female roles, it has also received criticism for poor representation.[7]

The voyeuristic gaze, then, is not linked to gender, but to the dominant power structure. Someone has the privilege of being the active subject, and someone else is the one who is objectified.

The author and scholar Mara Lee writes about what the objectifying gaze does to the *objectified other*; that is, to the person who is seen primarily as a body and only secondarily – if at all – as a subject *in* a body:

> … to be reduced to a body, to be seen as a body, to ceaselessly be pointed out and placed in the category Other because of one's body (...) how that works to breaks down the subjectivity that most take for granted. The thought:
>
> *Perhaps I am just*
> *this*
> *piece of meat*
> *whose value rises and*
> *falls with*
> *the approval of the outside world* [8]

Laura Mulvey wrote *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* in 1975. The text has had an enormous influence on feminist film theory, and it remains relevant for having identified the male gaze, revealing the patriarchal unconscious operating in Hollywood cinema. The analysis is sharp and useful, but it also has its limitations. Like most film theory of its time, it departs from white experience and excludes, even suppresses, other experiences and gazes.

The author and theorist bell hooks argues that traditional feminist film theory, with its one-sided focus on the psychoanalytical model, hinders the emergence of other

perspectives such as ethnicity and class. Paradoxically this replicates the mainstream film industry in continuing to render the black woman invisible.

> Feminist film theory rooted in an ahistorical psychoanalytic framework that privileges sexual difference actively suppresses recognition of race, reenacting and mirroring the erasure of black womanhood that occurs in films, silencing any discussion of racial difference – of radicalized sexual difference. 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 being about "women" when in actuality it speaks about white women.[9]

hooks reflects on what it does to a person to never see one's own body represented as anything more than absence in the image. She describes how she, as a black woman spectator, developed an "oppositional gaze" early on, since she could neither identify with the white male gaze or the objectified white woman in the films she saw in the cinema and on TV. hooks believes that many black woman spectators deconstruct the phallocentric visual language in that way, with a critical outside gaze, since they seldom see themselves in cinematic narratives, except perhaps as servants or nannies.

It's an interesting reflection. It opens up a number of different ways to relate to the objectifying gaze apart from the classic binary of victim-perpetrator, both of which are within the dominant system.

Perhaps one can choose one's own gaze. bell hooks simply states: There is power in looking,[10] and cites examples of filmmakers who make films from other perspectives including Camille Billops, Kathleen Collins, Julie Dash, Ayoka Shenzira and Zeinabu Davis. She sees potential for a feminist cinematic praxis to deconstruct and undermine classic cinematic language and to formulate new narratives that describe women's different experiences. Here, she identifies a potential turning point, or several *points of radical departure*, as she calls them. Her inspiring essay closes with a quote by Stuart Hall, whose vision was to perceive film

> […]not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as a new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover who we are.[11]

Laura Mulvey was also optimistic about the potential new ways of looking that the future held. She believed that leaving behind traditional cinematic forms and developing completely new ways of making films was prerequisite in order for a new cinematic language to emerge.

> Women – whose image had been both stolen and exploited in this context – can hardly feel more than perhaps a vague sentimental twinge as traditional film aesthetics fade to grey.[12]

What might a non-objectifying film be like? How to create a fim from the position of the other? What tools do I have at hand if I want to deconstruct the cinematic

language? What are my methods, which is my direction, where is my knowledge situated?

According to Mara Lee, those creating from the position of *the other* have to seek knowledge beyond established pathways. Her PhD dissertation *När Andra Skriver* (When Others Write) opens with a manifesto of sorts, she urges us not "to go back and conquer traditional male or white authorship positions," but to create something new. There is time. There is poetry.[13]

Is this a possibility, to use the poetic as a tool, or a weapon, or a sanctuary for an art practice (from the position) of the other? Perhaps this is where Mulvey's search for a new cinematic language and bell hooks' vision of "a radical departure" converge.

There is no female gaze.
But there is time.
There is poetry.

1. http//:dictionary.com
2. Berger, John. 1972. *Ways of seeing*. London: BBC/Penguin Books.
3. In the essay *Film and the Masqueadae* (Screen 23, 1982) film theorist Mary Ann Doane writes: "In his lecture on "femininity", Freud forcefully inscribes the absence of the female spectator of theory in his notorious statement, "to those of you who are women this will not apply – you are yourselves the problem". Sigmund Freud "Femininity" The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works od Sigmund Freud. (London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psychoanalyses, 1964)
4. Mulvey, Laura. 1975. *Visual pleasure in narrative cinema.* Screen. Reprinted in *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. [(Published in Swedish in *Modern Filmteori 2*, Studentlitteratur, trans. Anders Åberg])
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7, Hill, Libby. *With Their White Feminist Bias, TV's Prestige Dramas Continue to Fail*. Indie Wire July 11, 2019
8. Lee, Mara. 2014. *När Andra Skriver. Skrivande som motstånd, ansvar och tid.* Munkedal: Glänta produktion.
9. hooks, bell. 1992. *The oppositional gaze: Black female spectators, Black Looks: Race and Representation.* Boston, MA: South End Press.
10. Ibid
11. Hall, Stuart. 1989. *Cultural Identity and cinematic representation.* Framework 36.
12. Mulvey, Laura. 1975. *Visual pleasure in narrative cinema.* Screen. Reprinted in *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. [(Publicerad på svenska i *Modern Filmteori 2*, Studentlitteratur, övers. Anders Åberg])
13. Lee, Mara. 2014. *När Andra Skriver. Skrivande som motstånd, ansvar och tid.* Munkedal: Glänta produktion.