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# The Consequences of the “Male Gaze” and Sexual Objectification

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The “male gaze” is a term that is commonly used among feminists arguing the role of a female for the sexual objectification of a male spectator. The “male gaze” was originally brought up by Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, and her meaning of the term relates to the woman as a spectacle in film. Other feminists have used the term to describe print material as well as film and multi-media as being a product of the “male gaze”.

Sexual objectification means looking at a person as an object merely for sexual pleasure and as an object for use. Sexual objectification is comparable with the “male gaze” because both theories are feminism theories and have affects on men and women in our culture today. Feminist see sexual objectification as being a major part in the patriarchal order in which women are not equal to men. Sexual advertisement has also been a producer of the “male gaze” and sexual objectification, which in turn has created consequences proving feminism theories and causing psychological problems within some women in our culture.

Laura Mulvey’s *Visual and Narrative Pleasure* doesn’t regard homosexuals, and transgendered people in her theory concerning the “male gaze”, but her feministic views have opened reader’s eyes on the truth about patriarchal order existing in our culture. Laura Mulvey begins her essay with looking at women symbolically as the bleeding wound of castration, and unconsciously raising her child in this image, therefore continuing the patriarchy. Mulvey studies Freudian philosophy on phallogentrism<sup>1</sup> as she compiles her findings about how to break the oppression of the female gender.

Freud was also in her thoughts when determining the “male gaze”. In her essay she writes, “Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exists as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones. At this point he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze.”<sup>2</sup> Mulvey constitutes that the film industry has adapted a narcissistic way of portraying women as objects for men. In a way the film industry has preyed on the audience’s perversion and voyeuristic fantasies.

The “male gaze” according to Mulvey can be seen as active and passive roles that satisfy the spectator. The spectator in this culture is a man according to the patriarchal order we live in, and this makes the spectacle a woman. Freud’s views would support this as being a mirror image of oneself, a more egotistical image, which will be portrayed as the main man in the film as the woman is simply an erotic passive spectacle who has no bearing on the importance of the film. She is simply an erotic figure used as an object to fulfill fantasies for the spectator made by the spectator. The film aesthetics also have much to do with the messages portrayed, and how the “male gaze” can be subjected to the audience. The mise en scene is important in allowing the spectator to put himself into the scene. The dimensional aspect of the scene should be one dimensional in the fact that the egotistical spectator can fulfill his fantasy with the object of affection by looking at it as a still image with no distance between them.

Sexual objectification relates to the “male gaze” in the fact that it views a person as a sexual object for fetishistic fantasies, and disregarding the person’s personality. Sexual Objectification is an actual complex, and not all males look upon women as objects. There

are many feminists that study sexual objectification and argue for ways to prevent it, which in turn will hopefully help the patriarchal order to subside, and give women the respect they deserve.

Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts wrote an essay, *Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks*. They focus on the consequences behind the "male gaze" and viewing women of different ethnicities as sexual objects. As a result of sexual objectification, women have a self image that they are constantly monitoring, which causes stress and actual mental disorders. Sexual objectification and gender oppression have the same consequences for women which results in employment discrimination and sexual violence.

Frederickson and Roberts agree that sexual gazing is what enables sexual objectification, and when these acts occur women's body parts are what defines her as a person rather than her personality. The objectifying gaze, according to Fredrickson and Roberts, is noticeable in three different instances; the first being in public places with an actual social encounter and in most cases women of color is more apt to get a sexual comment with the gaze than a white women. The second scenario would be objectification in the media that portrays a likeness of a real encounter in which a male is gazing at a female while the female doesn't notice the attention, and her attention is directed at something else. The "male gaze" would be a good way to describe the third objectification instance in our society. Fredrickson and Roberts describe the third instance in terms credited to Laura Mulvey, and the "male gaze". They see this visual media sexual objectification as being the most threatening in our culture. The "male gaze" is not limited

to pornography; in fact it is portrayed throughout many films, live television, and advertisement. While men are mostly represented in detail facial view, women are mainly shown as body parts alone. These media tactics are actually provoking sexual objectification in our culture today.

Sexual objectification as a perspective on a person's physical self can also be considered a condition that affects people today. Because of the objective portrayal of women in the media and advertisement, some women actually start viewing themselves as objects and start to dissect their appearance to what is the culture's standard of being attractive. Some studies show that some women's life experiences can be based upon how other people view her appearance. Unger, R.K.<sup>3</sup> says that physical attractiveness can emanate power for women in the work place, or enhance social acceptance. Women that seem vain and narcissistic can very well be conditioned from sexual objectification and the "male gaze".

If the audience views the material presented to them in a preferred subject position, then they would definitely experience the effects of sexual objectification or the "male gaze". Some people view sexual advertisement in the oppositional subject position, in which they would have a more disgusted view and they would not be affected by sexual objectification or the "male gaze", in fact they may even argue against the messages being presented. Not all men are natural to the gaze and not all men objectify women. Women too aren't all affected by the "male gaze" or sexual objectification.

The women that are affected by sexual objectification can actually experience psychological problems throughout their lifetime, and according to Mulvey, raise their

children to support the patriarchal order. Certain women will experience shame, anxiety, peak motivational states, and awareness of internal bodily states. Fredrickson, Roberts (1997)<sup>4</sup> A definition of shame from Darwin, (1872) is a negative emotion that occurs when people evaluate themselves relative to some internalized or cultural ideal and come up short. Darwin seemed to notice the gaze as being an answer to the shame feeling.

Our culture consists of images of young, beautiful, slim, Caucasian females in our media, advertisement, and television. Studies show that only 1 in 40,000 women are considered model material, which proves that it's false advertisement at its best because women generally are not shaped that way. This fake ideal way to look has caused some women to be shameful of their own appearance, which then provokes feelings of worthlessness, confusion, and depression. Fredrickson and Roberts question the morality of our culture in which women feel shame due to sexual objectification.

Anxiety can be a permanent state of worry and nervousness occurring in a variety of mental disorders, usually accompanied by panic attacks or compulsive behavior.<sup>5</sup> Some women tend to be anxious about how someone else will see their attractiveness. There can also be safety anxiety in women concerning rape. Most rapists argue that the women were asking for it by the way they were dressed, so this statement proves that sexual objectification can be a cause for sexual violence. Men in our culture do not necessarily understand what women are mentally going through when determining their safety and constant anxiety based upon their appearance. Sexual objectification and the "male gaze" is the root to these mental illnesses among women.

From little girl stage to womanhood, females seem to become somewhat self conscious in themselves. Self conscious thoughts actually stop women from experiencing peak motivational states of learning which can disrupt their path in life of learning and gaining confidence to follow long term goals. Females view their bodies as objects from as young as grade school age when little boys start commenting on their appearance. This can turn both ways, because it seems natural for boys and girls to flirt with each other, but little boys growing hormones seem to have a larger impact on sexual objectification of their fellow females than that of objectification of males. Females biologically go through puberty faster and develop breasts that can be noticeable to young men, which then some males start objectifying females at a very young age.

Many theorists have also suggested that women are less aware of their internal bodily states than men, which is can easily be described as a problem caused from self views of objectification. Women are less likely to feel what their body is telling them through physiological sensations, for example; heartbeat, stomach contractions, and glucose level. This problem could be caused by either long term dieting and ignoring hunger cues, or self consciousness of the body due to body monitoring. Either way both of these answers can be rooted to objectification.

Fredrickson and Roberts studied many different consequences of the “male gaze” and sexual objectification. They have also come up with major mental illnesses thought to be caused from sexual objectification such as; depression, which was mentioned earlier, sexual dysfunctions, regarding female orgasms or lack thereof. Women generally do not have orgasms as easily as men, and this could be a result of many factors mentioned above

like ignoring physiological cues, and also women being self conscious about their bodies due to sexual objectification. One other example of an actual disorder would be eating disorders. Some women starve themselves to lose enough weight to feel comfortable in our culture. They call it a phenomenon in our culture that women actually want to starve, but many people see it as a repercussion of sexual objectification.

The “male gaze”, sexual objectification, and even self objectification can be seen in many different types of advertisement. One for example is the PETA commercial titled “Veggie Love.” The commercial was banned from the super bowl in 2009 because it was very perverted in the message they portrayed and the actresses weren’t dressed appropriately for public television. I presented the commercial to my peers in class, and they actually disproved sexual objectification because they acted in an oppositional position and actually rejected the ideological message that was presented, but some females are subjected to feelings of sexual objectification, and if it is causing some harm on females, then it truly needs to be noticed and disregarded from media and advertisement,

The “male gaze” is definitely present in the PETA commercial because it is made for a man as the spectator, viewing the images presented to them in objectionable form in which they can imagine themselves using the women as objects of sexual desire. The camera source in “Veggie Love” is actually set up to have a feel of being a man spectating over the women as they have their way with vegetables.

The PETA commercial is considered an extreme example of the “male gaze” and sexual objectification, but it is a good example because it shows that a lot of advertisement and media we watch today have mixed messages portraying sexual objectification and the



“male gaze”, and both of these feminist theories are proven to harm women throughout their lifetime. Women have lived with the patriarchal order, in my opinion, since the beginning of Christianity, or even further in history. Women have been struggling in our culture to be looked upon as being equal with men in the workforce, in public, and even at home. Respect is all women want. Some women don’t even know they are a product of the “male gaze” or sexually objectified, so there should be more education on this subject matter to teach women what other theorists have found over the years, so everyone is aware of these tactics being presented to us.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Privileging the masculine. Mulvey talks about phallogocentric ways still existing today and oppressing females.

<sup>2</sup> Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”1999

<sup>3</sup> Unger, R.K. (1979). *Female and Male*. New York; Harper and Row

<sup>4</sup> Fredrickson and Roberts purpose a series of mental illnesses that can inhabit women that are subjected to sexual objectification. Their references for this information is due to Deaux & Major, (1987) full source available in the bibliography.

<sup>5</sup> Definition Source; <http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&rlz=1R2ADRA enUS405&defl=en&q=define:anxiety&s=X&ei=fx8BTdi8NpKcsQPThfSvCw&sqi=2&ved=0CBYQkAE>

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