

HPRS5042/6042 COMPLEX BODIES: QUESTIONING GENDER, RELIGION, & SEXUALITY

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MULVEY AND THE MALE GAZE



WHAT IS THE GAZE?

The concept of the 'gaze' is one that has become an important part of how we understand the mechanics of gender with our society, but particularly with its representation in forms of media.

It directly deals with how an audience views the people presented within forms of culture, both visually and in other forms.

In the context of feminist theory, it usually takes three forms (though there can be other examples – e.g. the lesbian or gay gaze):

How men look at women,

How women look at themselves

How women look at other women.



WHAT IS THE GAZE?

Laura Mulvey coined the term 'Male Gaze' in 1975, but most fully describes and completes the theoretical outline of it in her 1989 'Visual and Other Pleasures'

Her work emerges from the field of film studies, but has been widely applied to other aspects of culture – like art, everyday interaction, or literature.

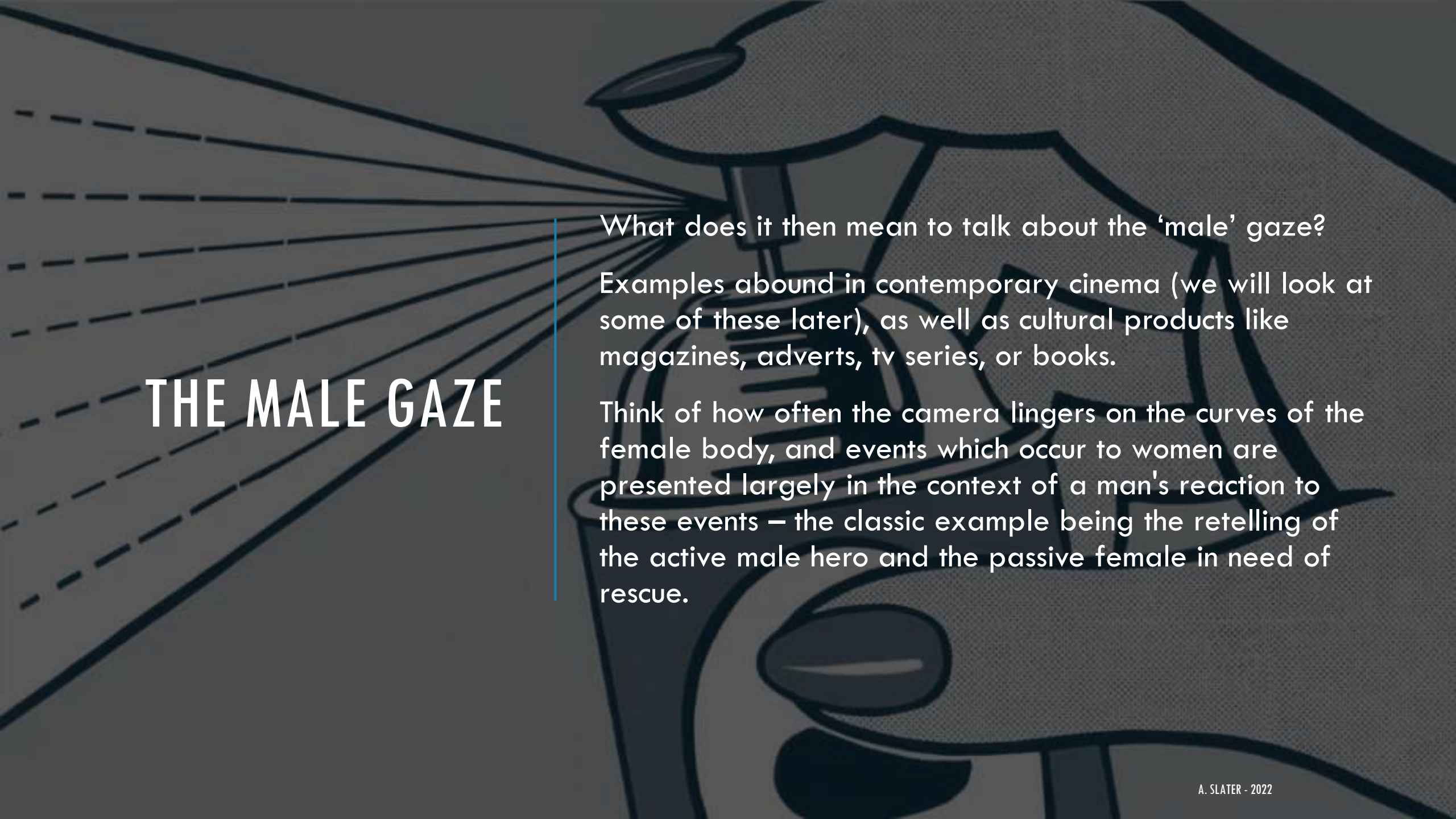
She believes that in film audiences have to 'view' characters from the perspective of a heterosexual male, and that this has a number of cultural and social effects on gender dynamics.



WHAT IS THE GAZE?

“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 phantasy on to the female form which 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”
Mulvey, 1989

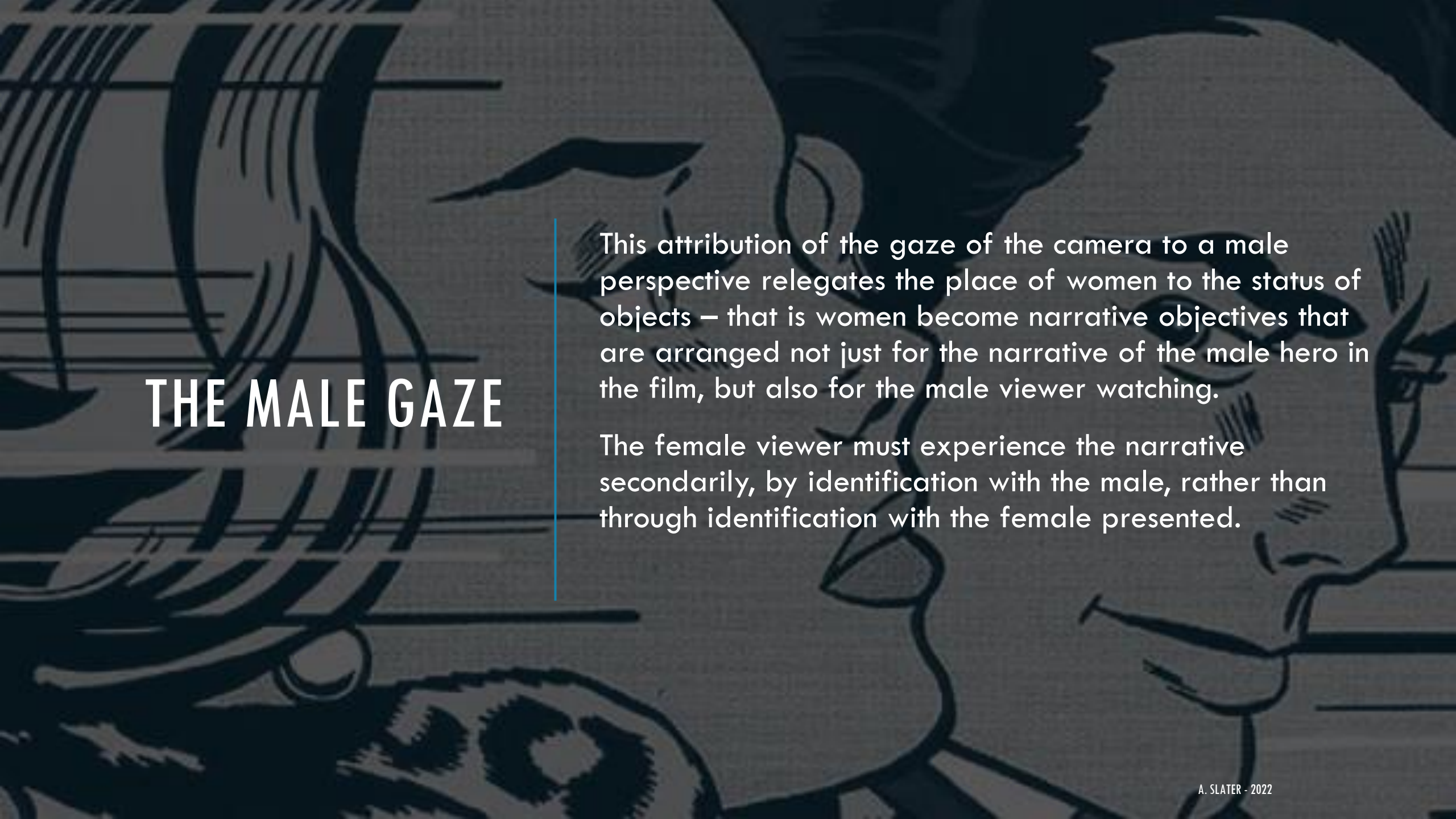
THE MALE GAZE



What does it then mean to talk about the 'male' gaze?

Examples abound in contemporary cinema (we will look at some of these later), as well as cultural products like magazines, adverts, tv series, or books.

Think of how often the camera lingers on the curves of the female body, and events which occur to women are presented largely in the context of a man's reaction to these events – the classic example being the retelling of the active male hero and the passive female in need of rescue.



THE MALE GAZE

This attribution of the gaze of the camera to a male perspective relegates the place of women to the status of objects – that is women become narrative objectives that are arranged not just for the narrative of the male hero in the film, but also for the male viewer watching.

The female viewer must experience the narrative secondarily, by identification with the male, rather than through identification with the female presented.

THE MALE GAZE

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ABNEjPxWEg>



THE MALE GAZE

A clear example of this is the music video across – She's So Lovely, by Scouting For Girls – but there are many, many, other possible choices.

In this case, the gaze is obviously directed from the male lead towards the woman pictured, with a tight focus on aspects of femininity expressed by her.

This is highlighted further by the lyrics sung across the view of the images and the cinematographic styles used to highlight and foreground her against other bodies in the images.



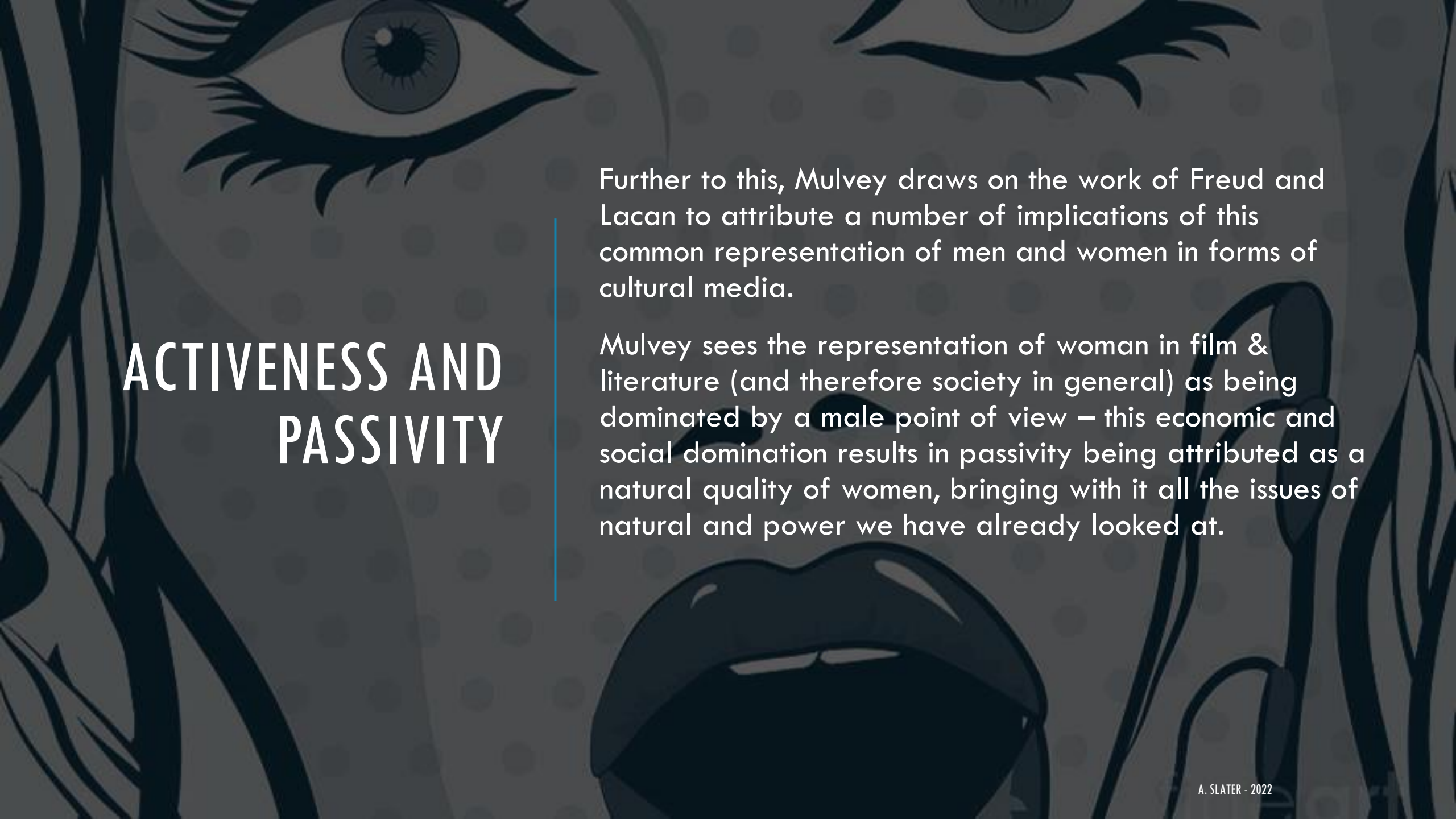
THE MALE GAZE

This intense focus and sexualisation of the representation of women in media culture is not only limited to those aspects that deliberately accentuate and highlight heterosexual desire, whether purely sexual or in the context of love.

We see the effects of the sexualizing of the female body even in situations where female sexiness has nothing to do with the product being advertised – juxtaposed with a product purely for the titillation or enthrallment of the male gaze.

An example – Herbal Essences shampoo:

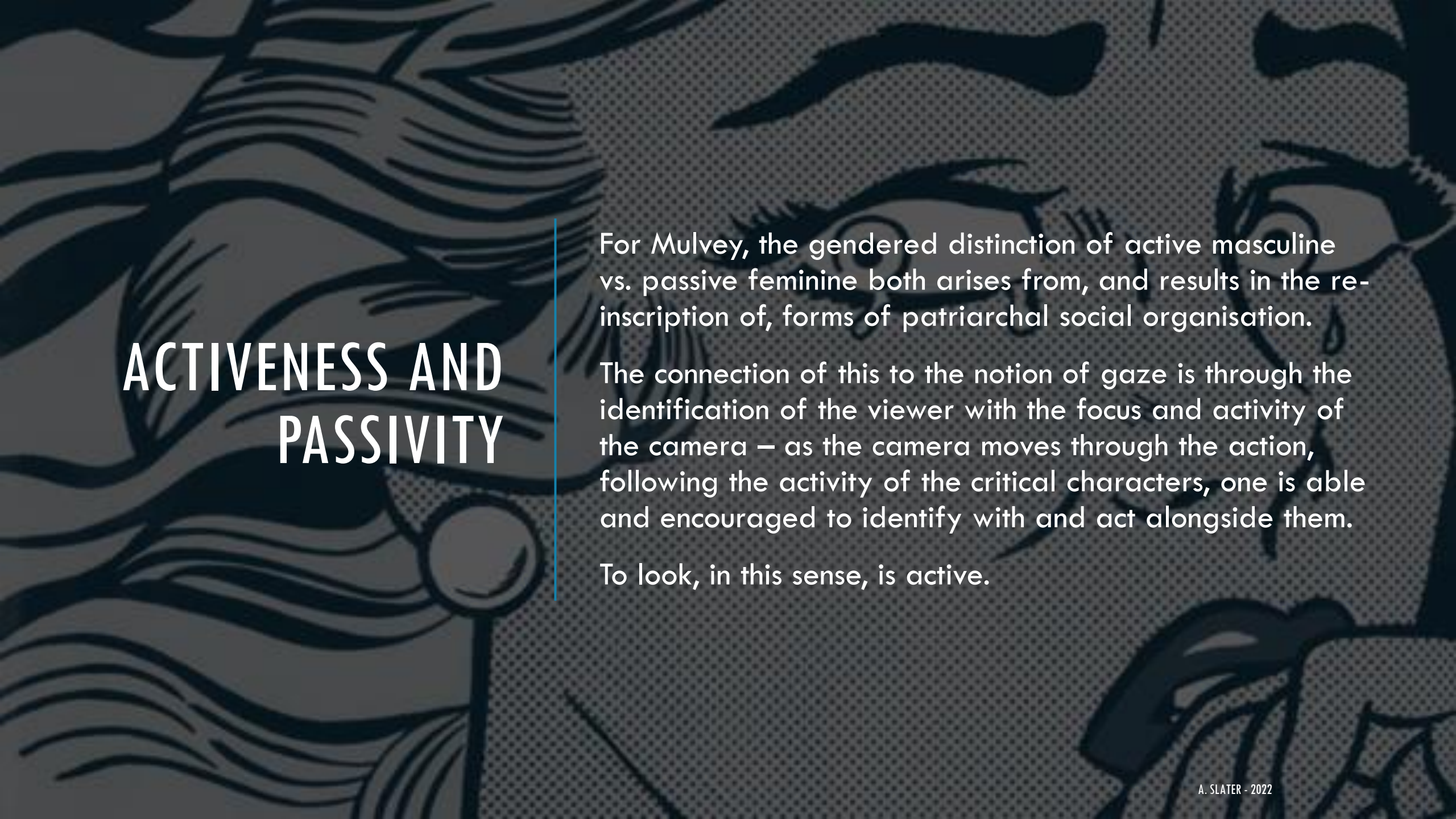
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4bOIPUEQIyQ>

A stylized, high-contrast illustration of a woman's face, focusing on her large, expressive eyes and full, dark lips. The image is rendered in a graphic, almost comic-book style, with bold black outlines and a limited color palette of greys and blacks. The woman's hair is depicted with long, flowing, dark strands. The overall composition is centered, with the face occupying most of the frame.

ACTIVENESS AND PASSIVITY

Further to this, Mulvey draws on the work of Freud and Lacan to attribute a number of implications of this common representation of men and women in forms of cultural media.

Mulvey sees the representation of woman in film & literature (and therefore society in general) as being dominated by a male point of view – this economic and social domination results in passivity being attributed as a natural quality of women, bringing with it all the issues of natural and power we have already looked at.



ACTIVENESS AND PASSIVITY

For Mulvey, the gendered distinction of active masculine vs. passive feminine both arises from, and results in the re-inscription of, forms of patriarchal social organisation.

The connection of this to the notion of gaze is through the identification of the viewer with the focus and activity of the camera – as the camera moves through the action, following the activity of the critical characters, one is able and encouraged to identify with and act alongside them.

To look, in this sense, is active.



ACTIVENESS AND PASSIVITY

This structuring of visual media around the expectation of male activity and female passivity can be seen in a number of ways.

These include that men have tended to play active roles which drive the narrative, while women have tended to play passive roles.

Further to this, where women are represented in film they are seen as erotic objects for male characters which slow the narrative.



ACTIVENESS AND PASSIVITY

This structuring has generally relegated women to one of two representations in visual culture, each the subject of a different form of the male gaze – either voyeuristic or fetishistic.

These gazes correlate to the two forms of femininity most commonly expressed in film – either the sexual active and seductive female, or the powerless and passive female.

Films have largely presented images of women that were produced simply for the gratification of male viewers.

PASSIVITY

“Woman, then, stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of a woman still tied to her place as the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.”

Mulvey, 1989

ACTIVENESS AND PASSIVITY

These two forms of female representation and their concomitant male gazes are often found attached to different female figures within a particular film, for example the seductive baddy and the chaste goody.

Sometimes the role taken on by the female figure changes according to the progression of the narrative – changing from a wild and unbridled passionate woman, to a controlled and submissive wife – or because of the changing desires of the male character (and the male audience through them).



PASSIVITY

Only Angels Have Wings -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXRyZe-vsJ8>

To Have and Have Not -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBM5Bte4Itg>

“...the film opens with the woman as object of the combined gaze of spectator and all the male protagonists in the film. She is isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualised. But as the narrative progresses she falls in love with the main male protagonist and becomes his property, losing her outward glamorous characteristics, her generalized sexuality, her show-girl connotations; her eroticism is subjected to the male star alone. By means of identification with him, through participating in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too.”

Mulvey, 1989

SOME EXAMPLES





COUNTER-EXAMPLES

There are, of course, a number of ways in which this notion of the male-gaze has been challenged and subverted within film.

A particularly pertinent one is the role of Ellen Ripley in the film series Alien, which, as part of the sci-fi genre, occurs within an even more male-dominated genre than others.

Ripley represents and reflects a historically relevant form of feminism, tied with many of the same attributes expressed in 2nd / 3rd wave forms of feminist activism.

ALIEN

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjLamj-b0l8>



ALIEN

Over the course of the Alien series, four films, we see Ripley's character develop and grow, particularly as she faces new challenges and struggles to overcome them.

Her casting and character role challenges a number of cultural norms about female leadership, the self-reliance of female characters, and the centrality of a female character in film.

In addition, many of the challenges faced by Ripley are directly related to and challenge her femininity, but the film preserves a concept of her active sexuality and gendered identity.

ALIEN

Beyond her own role, we also see Ripley engage with broader structural patriarchal forces, such as her struggle against the Company and against male authority characters in the films.

However, there are also distinctly 'feminine' attributions to the character, particularly around things like motherhood and caring instincts.





TERMINATOR

Another example of evolving female representation in media culture is the role of Sarah Connor within the Terminator franchise.

While in the first film she is depicted in a very stereotypical way – as hysterical, passive, and in need of rescue – her character shifts significantly over the course of the franchise, as does the representation of femininity more broadly.

We see this expressed in the change in her characters prominence and power in the second film, where she is able to actively fight against the Terminator.

TERMINATOR

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k64P4l2Wmeg>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRRIbK5w8AE>



TERMINATOR

This evolution of female representation continues in the third film and ensuing TV series – in the third film, the terminator itself is presented as female, although note the male gaze structuring this representation.

By the time we reach the TV series 'The Sarah Connor Chronicles', not only has the character become the titular role, but the level of importance of it has reached world-saving levels.

TERMINATOR

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UgPJhyJmlM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0fXTDl1egY>

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

Visual culture both depends on general culture for its intelligibility, but also drives forward aspects of general culture through changing representation.

Contemporary representations of women in visual culture, while still heavily subject to the male gaze, are increasingly likely to represent women as career-driven (the obsessed with work, but needs a man to complete her life trope), intelligent (the nerdy shy girl who only blossoms when a boy shows interest trope), confident (sassy and uncontrollable except by that one special guy trope), or violent (unpredictable and violent, presented as sexy and mysterious trope).





ASPECTS OF THE GAZE

There are a number of other ways in which the mechanics of the gaze have an impact on our society – Mulvey concentrates on the notion of the ‘male gaze’ as it is the most prevalent form within our heteronormative and patriarchal societies.

Some other points of interest in this area include the concept and eroticism of voyeurism / exhibitionism – the enjoyment of the gaze as a sexual experience – or the inter-group competitive gaze – where, for example, members of the same gender may be subject to a social gaze.

Further to this, we could talk of a ‘female’ gaze which attempts to impose objectification onto men, or of a ‘gay’ gaze, which might function similarly.

ASPECTS OF THE GAZE

In each of these alternative cases, there is a distinct difference to the male gaze in the power differential between the subject who gazes and the object of the gaze.

For Mulvey, and others, the male gaze is particularly prevalent precisely because of its social, economic, cultural power — it is involved in the maintenance and promotion of the meta-level patriarchal norms of society at a micro level.

In alternative situations, e.g. a gay gaze, the power differential functions in the opposite direction — from a marginalised subject, toward a dominant object.



ASPECTS OF THE GAZE

“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.”

Jonathan Schroeder, 1998

READING

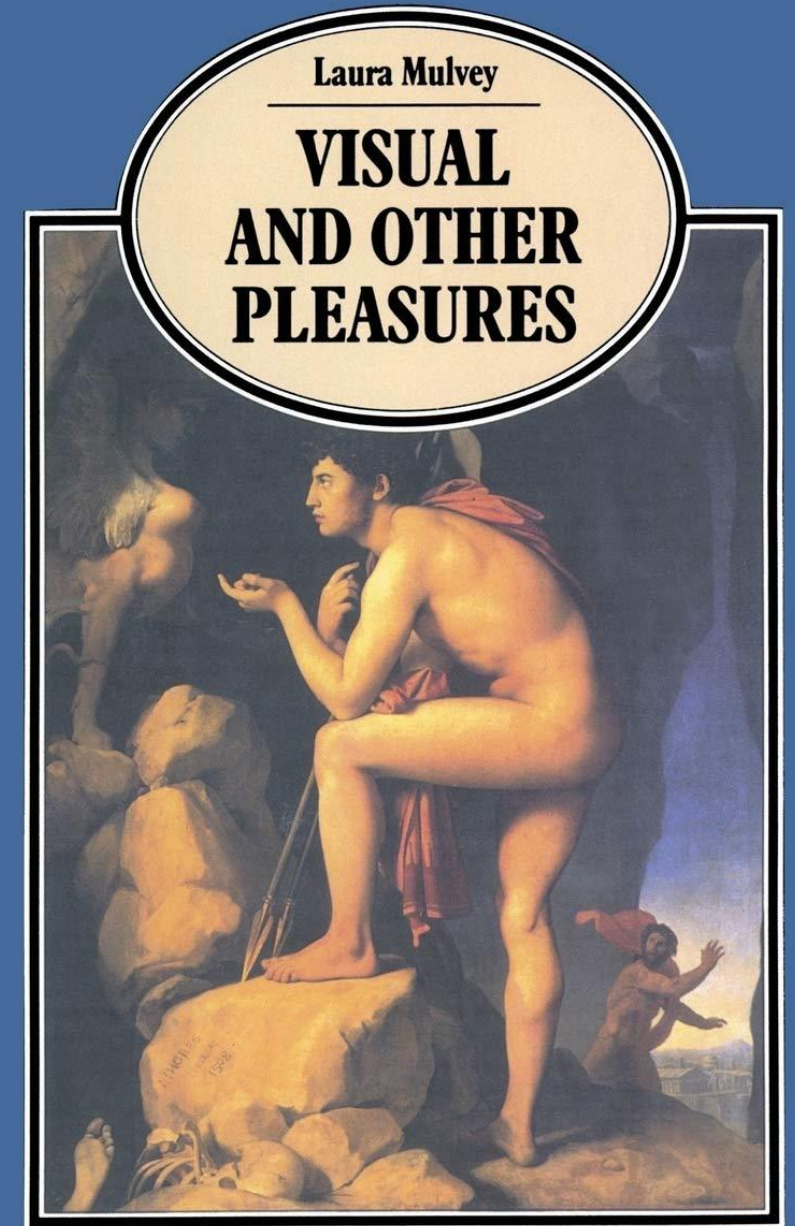
Today, we have looked at the concept of the male gaze, primarily through the work of Mulvey.

Your readings for this session are:

“Women as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look” (p.19-26) in ‘Visual and Other Pleasures’ by Mulvey

A permalink to this book is included on the Moodle page.

Piontek. (2021). “There Are No Ugly Men in Wakanda”: Black Panther, Spectatorship, and the Queer Male Gaze. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 54(4), 682–706.



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