

Femininity and the male gaze: an exploration of the concept of gender and the historical dualities of housewifery and the porn industry.

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Femineity and the Male gaze; an exploration of the concept of gender and the historical dualities of housewifery and the porn industry.

Introduction

In contemporary society, gender roles and stereotypes persist and shape societal expectations and perceptions of how we view gender. In this essay I will investigate the roles expected and options granted within femininity with a focus on women and their place and presence in a patriarchy. I will explore the concepts surrounding womanhood by investigating the work of Sarah Lucas, with a focus on *bunny gets snookered*; an exhibition built as the result of exploring misogyny and pornography within the media. Sarah Lucas creates works experimenting with the theme of abject femininity, emphasising the humanness of fellow humans under a gender divided societal structure. I will also explore the work of Marcia Schvartz in her exhibit *Doña Concha (1981)*, as an insight to the approach towards the traditional archetype of housewifery and family roles.

I will make comparisons to the artwork of Amedeo Modigliani, specifically his portrayal of the female form in *reclining nude (1917)* as an example of historical representations of women where the male gaze is present. I will be exploring Laura Mulvey's influential concept of the male gaze theory to examine how it influences the representation of women in all contexts. The artworks I have chosen to investigate provide insights into the contrasting perceptions of women historically. My intention within this essay is to unravel the intricate threads that connect these artworks to broaden discussions on femininity and masculinity, specifically drawing attention to the two limited roles and options women have been historically faced with within a patriarchal society notorious for exerting control over the narrative of femininity.

1. BUNNY GETS SNOOKERED



FIGURE 1: Sarah Lucas's *bunny gets snookered* 1997 at Sadie Coles HQ.



FIGURE 2: Sarah Lucas's *Pauline Bunny* 1997

Sarah Lucas is a contemporary British artist known for her controversial and often provocative take on abject femininity and societal taboos. Lucas works with a range of mediums including sculpture using objects such as furniture and tights. *Bunny gets snookered* 1997 **FIGURE 1** is an exhibition by Sarah Lucas featuring one of her more notable pieces *Pauline Bunny* 1997 **FIGURE 2**. In said exhibit, Lucas displayed 8 sculptures made of stuffed tights to create 'bunny girls' around a snooker table at Sadie Coles HQ as if to resemble snooker balls. Each 'bunny' had limp dangling arms and was dressed in stockings to resemble a playboy bunny.

The reference to the 'playboy bunnies' was intentional as historically women who model for the magazine playboy are photographed as objects of desire and the images are aimed toward a predominantly heterosexual male audience. Lucas comments on this representation of femininity by creating these figures to remind us of the character of the seductress, whilst also suggesting physical weakness with weak, limp limbs and hanging heads that contrast this illusion of empowerment and femme fatal and instead connote with secretarial submission and vulnerability. The two contrasting ideas that form these pieces force viewers to confront the uncomfortable intersections of desire and objectification making a mockery of the stereotype of lust surrounding masculinity. The ridiculous over objectification in the context of pornographic material speaks on the male fantasy and Laura Mulvey's theory on the male gaze provides a lens to analyse this further.

Mulvey's theory states that traditional cinematic representation is structured around a heterosexual male perspective, and this inherently objectifies women.

The gaze is divided into two primary aspects in cinema, the voyeuristic gaze and the fetishistic gaze. The voyeuristic gaze involves the (predominantly male) audience aligning themselves with a male protagonist whereas the fetishistic gaze objectifies the female characters, narrating them as sexual objects. In terms of power dynamics, the male gaze reinforces patriarchal structures where the female characters are to be consumed visually and the male character holds an active role in the narrative.

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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 figure which is styled accordingly.

(Laura Mulvey, 1975, v4)

In the context of Sarah Lucas's artwork, you could argue that she plays with the concept of the male gaze in her exhibition bunny gets snookered by emphasising and exaggerating an already existing fetishization on women in this context. The elongated legs, stockings and absence of face creates these ridiculous overtly sexual figures inviting a fetishistic gaze from the viewer.

Something else worth mentioning is how the figures are arranged on office chairs to mimic balls on a snooker table which morphs the humanoid figures into something less than human: balls in a game. Snooker is historically a male dominated sport. Lucas' intentions in arranging the 'bunnies' into pawns of a historically male dominated game could be used as an analogy to accentuate the power imbalance between the passive woman and the male as a narrative linchpin.

The bunny girl is trapped by her femininity only to be knocked against her fellow bunnies in a game of masculine skill.

(Elizabeth Manchester, 2002)

Suggested by this quote from Elizabeth Manchester and as Laura Mulvey implies with her theory of the male gaze, the figures representing women aren't supposed to be valued as humans and only as balls in a game. The men in this hypothetical scenario are the definers of their sexuality and therefore their own femininity.

2. Reclining Nude 1917



FIGURE 3: Amedeo Modigliani's *Reclining Nude* 1917

From a male perspective, another artist who explores the female form is Amedeo Modigliani. Modigliani was an Italian painter and sculpture associated with the modernist movement and his portrayal of the human figure, particularly the female nude. One of his well-known paintings; *reclining nude 1917* FIGURE 3 presents a reclining nude woman. The curves and contours of her body are emphasised and elongated which contribute to the sense of elegance and abstraction. The painting is described in itself as erotic by the MET museum. At the time of this painting's creation (the early twentieth century) the suffragettes were fighting for the vote, there was limited access to education for women, traditional gender roles were prevalent, and the art world was heavily dominated by men. One of the many things this period is marked by is the evolving struggle for women's rights and whilst Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory did not emerge until the 1970s, it retrospectively sheds light on artworks from earlier decades such as Modigliani's.

In *reclining nude*, it becomes evident from the portrayal of the idealised female form, similar to that of a modern 'playboy bunny' that the woman depicted embodies the male fantasy,

transforming the artwork into a manifestation of social expectations and standards, perpetrating the objectification of the female form. Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze underscores the interpretation that this painting is shaped by the power dynamics of that era which depict the woman as a nameless female, exposed and adhering to prevailing conventional beauty standards of that time.

Unlike depictions of Venus from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, in which female nudity is couched in mythology or allegory, Modigliani provocatively presents his reclining nude without any such context highlighting the painting's eroticism.

(MET Museum.org)

The painting conveys a theme of sensuality that is traditional throughout art history as the female nude is often mythologized. *Reclining nude 1917* being labelled a sensual or 'erotic' painting aligns with the power dynamics where women were often positioned as subjects to be observed or consumed.

John Berger, an English art critic, novelist and painter, is known for his influential book *ways of seeing* (1972). *Ways of seeing* challenges traditional perspectives on art, emphasising the role of social and cultural contexts in understanding visual images. Something he touches on is the way women are perceived in art. Similar to Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, Berger suggests that the woman in a painting becomes a product of the viewers gaze but also as a response to the time this painting was created in. Modigliani's *reclining nude* reflects the prevalent attitude toward femininity and beauty as a product of its time and the canvas serves as a mirror to the societal ideals of the early twentieth century.

Comparing Sarah Lucas's *bunny gets snookered* **FIGURE 1** to Amedeo Modigliani's *reclining nude* **FIGURE 3** is to talk about the passivity that the idealised women in both contexts are presented as. Modigliani's painting reinforces traditional gender roles portraying an image of the male fantasy, an example of Mulvey's male gaze, whereas Lucas introduces humour and exaggerates the notion of women being objectified. Modigliani's work aligns with historical norms reinforcing the passive subject whereas Lucas challenges these norms and intends on disrupting them.

3. DOÑA CONCHA



FIGURE 4 : DONA CONCHA 1981

On the other side of the coin, I will talk about Marcia Schvartz's *Doña concha* (1981) **FIGURE 4**, which translates to "Mrs concha" in English: an instillation at the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid made up of the video work *hanging out* and an instillation depicting a puppet of an older woman positioned to be hanging out clothes on a line. Schvartz's is an illustrator, painter, sculpture and filmmaker from Argentina primarily known for her feminist figurative paintings.

Her intentions within this piece were to humour a stereotype surrounding housewifery and the depiction of women during the civic military dictatorship experienced in Argentina over the late twentieth century ('76-83). Schvartz's work can be categorised as abject with emphasis on ageism, sexism and the grotesque perception of aging womanhood.

A visual description of this installation shows a puppet made of rubber, papier-mâché and foam dressed as a traditional older woman, supposedly hanging up washing, wearing a pair of rubber gloves. She stands under a washing line and next to her is an old tv playing Schwartz's film piece *hanging out* which shows a sequence of images of the puppet in different domestic scenarios. The figure is dressed wearing hair curlers and an apron and is standing next to a laundry basket with her hands raised in the air.

The grotesque as a mirror disfiguring reality is a constant running through Argentinean theatre, a poetic strategy taken up by Schwartz from a feminist and ironic gaze.

(Museo Reina Sofia 2023)

To explain the context of Schwartz's installation it is important to note that it is a feminist response to the socio-political climate of the time, which was the end of a civic military dictatorship of the late twentieth century. This as a time when feminists among others often found themselves targeted by the regime and women suffered many forms of gendered violence as well as reinforced gender roles. The way in which Schwartz has responded to the dictatorship era is through humour to emphasise the laughable representation of how women were expected to behave and the depiction of the housewife through a performative and theatrical notion, creating a mockery of female representation of that era.

Schwartz's depiction of *Doña Concha* is making the comparison between the way the housewife is typically represented on stage as being unappealing and mockable and the expectations surrounding the domestic role of women of that time. This concept is similar to the way Sarah Lucas reacts to objectification in the media. A similarity I found in both of these pieces is the female interpretation of the male gaze which is achieved by exaggerating features and creating a dehumanised and often humorous version of the original characters in order to mock the male gaze and the way these women are represented by men in both contexts.

Marcia Schwartz uses the role of a housewife to convey a nuanced commentary on gender roles and societal expectations during the dictatorship. Housewives have historically been

portrayed through a lens that fetishized domesticity, reinforcing a narrative of submissive femininity. In my opinion, traditional housewives share a commonality with porn stars in that they are both subject to a form of fetishistic gaze. Whether they are reduced to objects of desire within the confines of a home or for their sexuality, by comparing these different artists work it is easy to acknowledge the parallels and question the inherent objectification embedded in both narratives which interlink them, whether that be through the lens of the the submissive homemaker or the passive sexual object. Both of these common representations can be seen as fulfilling male fantasies under Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. Both the artists Sarah Lucas and Marcia Schwartz share a common theme of making light out of the damaging representation of women within a patriarchy.

Sarah Lucas's bunny gets snookered, and Marcia Schwartz's *Doña Concha* serve as poignant reflections of the contrasting realms of porn and housewifery, yet both reveal an underlying commonality- the objectification of women and male written femininity. By applying Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory I have added depth to our understanding revealing the pervasive influence of patriarchal perspectives in shaping the narratives around female subjects within art as well as our day-to-day existences.

To conclude, in this exploration of femininity, traditional masculinity and the historical dualities between housewifery and the porn industry, the artworks *bunny gets snookered* by Sarah Lucas and *Doña Concha* by Marcia Schwartz have served as powerful lenses through which to scrutinise societal constructs of gender from a female perspective across different cultural contexts. Lucas's bunny gets snookered and Schwartz's *Doña concha* have highlighted contrasting narratives surrounding women in domestic roles and within the adult industry. Amedeo Modigliani's *reclining nude* has acted as a comparison underscoring the enduring impact of societal expectations on representations of femininity historically.

The theoretical framework provided by Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory has been crucial in dissecting the influence of patriarchal perspectives in both art and everyday life. It is evident that is the case whether that is within the explicit gaze of the porn industry though content such as 'playboy', brought attention to by Sarah Lucas, or the subtler yet equally potent gaze within domestic settings, suggested by Schwartz's *Doña Concha*, Women have found

themselves situated within predefined roles that cater to male desires in both contexts. It is clear that the dualities examined extend behind artists representations. They reflect and perpetuate ingrained societal outlooks surrounding both femininity and masculinity. The shared theme of objectification encourages us to reconsider the historical roles imposed upon women in both public and private spheres.

Doña concha with its portrayal of femineity takes on added significance when contextualised within the traumatic history of the civic dictatorship in Argentina at the time of this piece's creation. Schwartz subtly weaves layers of meaning into her work inviting us to reflect not only on gender roles but also on the socio-political context that has shaped and challenged traditional notions of womanhood.

Modigliani's *reclining nude* acts as a product of its time, depicting how women have been historically presented as objects of male desire across the eras. This is a reoccurring theme throughout this essay which I analysed using both Mulvey's male gaze theory and John Berger's views on the perception of women in art. My intention throughout this exploration has been to draw a spotlight onto the concept of gender as we aspire to understand the collective issues surrounding femininity and masculinity in both art and life.

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