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Question: Question 5:

From the **Lens-Based Image Making** research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

Module: Research In Context (ADAD5003/C

Lecturer: Paul Duerinckx

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Figure 2 : Manet, E. (1863) *Luncheon On The Grass* . Available at :

<https://mymodernmet.com/edouard-manet-the-luncheon-on-the-grass/>.
(Accessed 03 December 2024).

Figure 3 : Weir, H. (2019) *Father* . Available at :

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Is The female Gaze Doomed To Be Perceived Just As Shallow As The Male Gaze In Modern Society?

The female gaze is a contemporary concept in today's social construct, artists, creatives and theorists are trying to combat the meaning of the female gaze in reference to the male gaze. The female gaze is a experimental and fresh view on surveying and is not so clearly defined. One way of looking at the concept, the female gaze is "the female gaze embraces the spectator, character, and the directors of these works and sets out to represent women as people who are capable of the same things men are." (lotifus, 2023).

This essay will look to see if the historical projection of the woman as a sexual object has hindered the female gaze as a cultural movement. We will also be looking at how the women's gaze becomes an exercise of looking beyond the objectifying male heterosexual lens and the male subconscious bias that comes with the territory.

While we try to decipher the female gaze we will look at how John Berger describes the male gaze. Whilst being aware at how culture has changed Medusa's Mythological legacy from historical to feminine contemporary culture through the eyes of feminist scholar Susan R. Bowers, where the feminine gaze term was "coined" from Laura Mulvey through analysing the male gaze in the 60s era of Hollywood predominantly. In art's inception we will be analysing the depictions of women and how that set the trend for the man to push the female biology into aesthetic design.

Dating back to the earliest sculptures ever recorded of the human body, we can see depictions of women as some of the first ever made in recorded history. "Nothing is known about the creator, and the meaning of this effigy" (Mictlan, 2018) yet the face has been branded as female because of the "feminine shape of the chin and apparent hair or headdress" (Mictlan, 2018).



Fig . 1:*Head sculpture*

However this statue is being categorised here as a “realistic depiction of a human face”(Norton, 2024) but at a glance one cannot identify its gender on its own as its not conforming enough without the full context of its body. The “Ice age figure” (Hitchcock, 2024) was one of the first to be sculpted in such a harsh landscape, we can most likely infer that the sculpture is stylised or simplified. If the sculpture is female from the assumptions made by historians and video essays such as Joe Scott’s on YouTube genders the creator of this statue as a he. So we can suggest the sculpture was made through the male gaze 25,000 years ago. We can marry the sculpture with this modern artists depiction of model used. The model is far to pretty and the model looks smooth and groomed in its creation creating a bias to the original face leading to an interpretation of the male gaze. This is not a realistic depiction of a woman of her time. However this has happened because males have looked at a notion of the beauty standard and have held the sculpture hostage to beauty symbolism. This is realised with this painting of a woman next to the sculpture.

Medusa, the mythical being from Greek mythology is another historic hostage of the male gaze. Medusa whose character was made up by a male poet who paints a familiar picture of women in storytelling medusa is

“Made to suffer the penalty of what is inflicted on her” as in this mythological story medusa was “attacked and raped” (Rhys, 2023) by Poseidon. Medusa who was written to be beautiful before being punished for this incident was the victim of the male and was punished by Athena becoming a monster with snakes as hair. This “Rape Narrative” (Diver, 2020) saw Medusa “shamed for her own assault” (Tuzzo, 2020) more commonly known in todays society as the term slut shaming, in this case being the victim of the male a parrel still seen amongst women today.

Today this narrative has shifted to see medusa as a embodiment of female rage and a male gaze defiant, Jess Zimmerman would state here during her youth as seeing medusas monstrous description as “ugly power” (Zimmerman 2022, p. 12). Zimmerman touches upon her personal insecurities with herself as the reason for looking towards medusa as a online avatar. From this I can see a link between defiance of the female beauty standards that have been a contributing factor from men through the male gaze, I can also see the strength that come with that from the way Zimmerman references power. Medusa turning her punishment into female empowerment through her new identity.

“to be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space” (Berger, 1972 page 46). Berger’s quote here suggests men and women have been conditioned in different ways and that this is illustrated in western art.



Fig. 2: *The Luncheon On The Grass*

The painting, *The Luncheon On The Grass* by Édouard Manet captures the issues surrounding western culture towards the objectification of women. We can see two smartly dressed men in a woodland enjoying a picnic with a naked woman. This image is a sexual image due to the woman being nude despite not needing to be in her depiction. You can argue the woman in this painting is acting defiant to the men, she is not interacting with the men in this image therefore she is not afraid to show disinterest to men in a social context. She is not mindful of herself in a “mans presence” (Berger, 1972 p.45).

One can also say it is uncharacteristic for the woman in western art to meet the male gaze head on. It is theorised that the male gaze is punished when the look is returned by the female. The woman's Medusa-look paralyses him because it presumes to take away his power." (Goddard, 2000) meaning the man feels powerful when looking at femininity voyeuristically but can not feel powerful when met with female defiance. However with this active gaze opposed to being "passively looked at by someone" (Pannepinto, 2020) the fatale flaw is that the art was created by a man, can we call a gaze of a naked woman surrounded by two fully dressed men defiant? "The male gaze in media has been noted to date back as far as the renaissance" (Gabriel, 2017) and this is important information as it's also been documented that Manet's "composition of the painting was inspired by renaissance artworks" (Mattei, 2023) this was a time where visual pleasure for the man was becoming a successful formula in painting and it could be seen that Manet has used the aesthetics of the naked woman to gain attention from the spectator, using the woman's beauty aesthetic as a tool for the male artist to create a conversation. This is something that could be done today without problematic discussion as the man sees the naked woman as an object even if it's in a subconscious state. There is a level of beautification in a

women in art and this has been embraced by society as we are being told how to look at women.

Considering again , John Burgers analysis on the male gaze. His information is objective however we can suggest he cant see past the male gaze in oil paintings. His opening to ways of seeing episode two says as much, “women in the culture of privileged Europeans is first and foremost a sight to be looked at” (Berger, 1972) j he also references beauty in regards to binary, “beautiful or not beautiful”. This maybe a dated concept, artists like Harly Weir is challenging that very concept in photography. We can also look at the luncheon on the grass again and notice how the model seems comfortable in the nude adding power and freedom to her character.

Johns Berger’s video contextualises is the struggle women have from their body being manipulated in art, one women in the video states “because women have been subject to stylised poses and angles that flatter themselves in camera form or the mirror when you see yourself in a shop window you get a big shock.” (Berger, 1972) this may have contributed to the female human condition where women are constantly analysing themselves like how they have seen beauty illustrated in modern media and art alike.

Today's social media platforms where the selfie and mirror selfie has become the conduit to maximising self-surveillance with an active audience. More and more females then fall into this trap which has now profited the cosmetic business as “the global cosmetics market has experienced an almost incessant growth since 2024 and was forecast to generate revenues amounting to nearly 129 billion U.S dollars by the year 2028” (Petruzzi, 2024). The historic implications of stripping the women of their dignity for beautiful paintings still prove to leave their mark on society today.

Laura Mulvey a feminist theorist, touches on Sigmund Freud's scopophilia concept, referencing the male gaze as “Narcissistic” (Mulvey 1973 p. 806) towards the female. The Oxford dictionary states “Mulvey argues that cinema viewing conditions facilitate both the voyeuristic process of the objectification of female characters and also the narcissistic process of identification with an ideal ego seen on screen” (Oxford dictionary, 2024). Sigmund believes this manifestation of the male gaze's projection comes from childhood curiosity stating “curiosity about other people's genitals and bodily functions” (Mulvey 1973 p. 808) this suggests that the male gaze may pervert this innocent curiosity.

At a young age a brother and sister as a similar age may be indistinguishable from each other, both may wear similar clothes and play together but Mulvey is highlighting in today's media something may have become distorted for women in modern society for them to become this narcissistic support role of the male fantasy in the context of Hollywood cinema. The aspect of the male then becoming the viewer in a consumer sense compounds the fantasy which leads to subjugation of the female as the projected passive role in society.

Therefore we can suggest the woman in film is a passive character so that the "male gaze can project its fantasy on to the male gaze" (Mulvey, 1975) the man is seen to be strong, clever composed for example so the female must be the opposite to serve the male power fantasy. Its through the passive nature of the female the male project their fantasy upon them.

Mary Anne Doane's book film and masquerade suggests that women should dissociate with the male vision of the female in Hollywood needs to adopt a masculine viewpoint, "The idea seems to be this: it is understandable that women would want to be men, for everyone wants to be elsewhere than in the feminine position" (Hansen, 1982). Perhaps this highlights the disconnection that male creatives had for women. Has this

improved the way women are perceived today? As people want realism in cinema today but should this be defined by a gaze?

Harley weir

Today, female artists have emerged in the mainstream almost everywhere in Europe and if you look at the history of art, women as a artist collective identity are still in the process at creating their own visual Language, one of those aspects is the female gaze, its definition is disputed still and forming in the art world.

Weir is a youthful artist and has made work that reflects her understanding of gender objectification through a modern lens which we will reflect on as, Weir grew up in a male objectifying world. “ I didn’t get to see many sexualised images of guys, unless it was gay porn, which I did have a phase of watching. Its hard to know what you fully desire as a woman when almost everything you’ve seen was made by a man” (Weir, 2019) Weir has identified how visual pleasure has narrated women in art by men and that seems to have frustrated weir growing up. It also shows that women are fighting back against the male gaze narrative.



Fig. 3: *Father*

This image of the body without its head becomes the object, we can see the perfectly shaped contours of the body are captured so that body is transcended into a sculpture, the work mimics Mapplethorpe whose work was arguably “potent and erotic depictions of Black men” (Bedsworth, 2024) is history repeating itself of objectivity from both genders. However weir has not seen any backlash from the series *Father* due to objectifying men in fact its seen as arguably liberating due to the rich history of the male gaze which has tainted representation. It could be seen that *Father* could be an appropriation of the male gaze but weirs comments on being directly driven by attraction and defiance arguably leads her gaze to be trapped into the same routine of objectification of the opposite gender.

In conclusion we can look at the female gaze as a still forming narrative.

The female gaze is something new and different to male gaze however the

gaze has a strong reference to the already formed male gaze. Weir suggests the female gaze could be the opposite of the male gaze. Females becoming the objectifier? This feels too shallow. It's possible that women, the objectified are not happy with the male gaze because women see not objectification but emotion, Trans women unlock emotions when starting hormones and we could suggest that the female gaze could take charge of evoking feminine concepts that emphasise emotion and promoting a female narrative that women can identify with from within for example emotion, rather than desirable physical traits that the male gaze has illustrated women in society.

We can also look to how Mulvey and Weir talk about their experience with the male gaze and how dominant it was in society, Weir and Mulvey being a generation apart were still dictated by male gaze influence in capitalist society. Mulvey and Weir in their language seem almost angry at the thought that visual pleasure was narrated predominantly by men.

Today visual pleasure has taken a very casual turn, The subscription based platform Only Fans, where women in some instances sell their revealing images for money however this behaviour is fuelling the male gaze narrative that women are still a physical representation of just beauty to be looked upon in a sexualised manner.

It's possible that combative examples of the female gaze that are to connected to objectification. Perhaps in the next fifteen to twenty years female representation and the female gaze will have a more defined definition and currently definitions and examples of the female gaze are hard to find.

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