

Keywords: Gaze, Storytelling, Social-Media

Student Name: Sally Clements

Student Number: 1809487

Course: BA Illustration

Module: Research in Practice (ADAD5004)

Word Count: 2,396

Lecturers: Donna Williams and Louise Burston

How Does the Male Gaze Perpetuated in Modern Media Affect the Self-Esteem of Young Women?

In this proposal the theory of 'The Male Gaze' and its ramifications on specifically young women, will be investigated. Using three keywords, different angles on the subject will be considered, with this research being supported with three visual artists and thinkers minimum, as well as the use of images. This will include a range of references such as: the pre-Raphaelite art movement (gaze), cartoonist Alison Bechdel (storytelling) and film theorist Laura Mulvey (gaze). With the research collected for this essay my hope will be to pose a question which can be followed on and further explored in my third-year independent research document.

Gaze



Figure One

Coined first by film theorist Laura Mulvey, the male gaze implicates that women are a passive object, and not an active subject, the woman becomes “the bearer of meaning and not the maker of meaning” (Mulvey, 1975). Although Mulvey’s theory is in the context of cinema, the male gaze arguably stretches to most all visual works, including centuries worth of paintings. It is important to consider how the use of the male gaze in visual media can have lasting effects on viewers, both male

and female.

The Pre-Raphaelite art movement is a great example for applying this theory. When evaluating paintings from this movement, the main subject(s) are mostly always female, and in almost all, the female portrayed is never looking directly at the viewer. Often the male character is looking directly at the woman, but the woman is always looking away or looking down- or in the case of the famous painting 'Ophelia' (above) by Sir John Everett Millais, she is dead.

The asymmetry of the gazes certainly implies the fetishization of the female, the result of male fantasy. In all of these paintings we could argue that the male viewer is privileged and allowed, indeed encouraged, to take on the position of the voyeur." (Sawhney, 2006)

With pre- Raphaelite paintings drawing inspiration from biblical stories and legend, as well as "subjects from literature and poetry, particularly those dealing with love and death" (Tate, 2021), one could argue that the women painted were idealised and portrayed as romantic tragedies. The painting 'The Lady of Shalott' by John William Waterhouse was inspired by an 1883 Alfred Tennyson poem about a woman with an undisclosed curse. The Lady acquires the affects of said curse by looking at, and falling for, the image of the knight Lancelot- the crux of her story is driven by falling in love with man, who is also the reason for her death.



Figure Two

These paintings still have immense popular appeal in modern day and are considered to have “an utterly romantic spirit” (Frey, 2020). Whilst paintings like ‘Ophelia’ and ‘The Lady of Shalott’ are beautiful, when we as the audience dissect them in collaboration with the male gaze, it begs the question of what we as a society consider to be romantic. Is that idea of what love and romance is healthy or realistic? Is the portrayal of what being a beautiful woman is fair?

The examples used are from the time period of 1848 to roughly 1870, which conveys that this way of thinking has long been engrained into society, and that women have long had an internalized male gaze. Without even meaning to, for centuries women have adopted a “view of their personal self that best aligns with and pleases male voyeurs” (Ansari, 2020) which has had a detrimental effect on women’s psyche.

In an experiment by Calogero (2004), women were told that they would either be experiencing a male gaze or female gaze. They found that the mere anticipation of a male gaze increased self-objectification in young women and led to greater body shame and social physique anxiety when compared to participants who anticipated a female gaze or no gaze at all. (Well, 2017)

To reference the women in these paintings, through the male gaze they have been reduced to objects; things to be observed, their only characteristic is the way that they look. Not only is it the way that they look, but it is the way the MEN that painted them wanted them to look. They are not only idealised and put on pedestals because of their tie to biblical stories or myth, they are idealised by being the perfect appearance for the man who was painting them. The quote by Well illustrates the long-standing effects this kind of behaviour can have. When there is a long history of reducing women down to how they look, and that being their most important feature, it is of course going to have a lasting effect on all women up to our present day.

Storytelling

In 2021 it has never been easier to consume visual media. Cinema, traditional television, and with the expanse of the internet only growing, this has developed the increasing number of subscription based streaming sites like Netflix and Disney+, and the free video streaming site YouTube. With so many outlets, there is now the ability to seek out different narratives, ones that differ to those traditionally shown on prime-time television.

In 2021 there was the Channel 4 miniseries 'It's a Sin', a programme which followed a group of gay men trying to navigate the HIV/ AIDS crisis in the UK during the 80's. The series was written by Russell T Davies who himself is gay and would have a personal experience with this subject, helping to create an authentic storyline. The 2020 film Promising Young Woman follows one woman seeking to avenge the death of her friend who was a rape victim. The film was directed and written by Emerald Fennell, who as a woman would have a much more authentic and realistic view of the harassment women face from men simply by being a woman.

So why is it that the male gaze is still as prominent as ever within film and television? And how does this view of the male gaze impact differently to how it was discussed in relation to art?

The fact of the matter is men still have the run of Hollywood and the entertainment industry. In 2019 only "10.6 percent of film directors in Hollywood were women" (Stoll 2021), and this is an increase compared to 2018 which was only 4.5%. Screenwriting does not fair better, in 2017

“women represented 11 percent of the writers on the United States’ top 250 films” (Montpelier, 2018), and in the UK the Writers Guild of Great Britain (WGGB) published a study which found:

only 16% of all working screenwriters in film are female. Female writers in TV, while comparatively better represented, remain in the minority – the percentage of television episodes written by women stands at only 28%.
(WGGB, 2018)

When production teams are imbalanced, we lose women’s voices and opinions in the narratives. Without the influence of a female voice, we end up with female characters depicted through the male gaze. Just one example to support this would be the depiction of Megan Fox in the 2007 Michael Bay Transformers film series. Fox’s character has “no relevance to the story line” (Sampson, 2015) and she is used in the film to “please the heterosexual male, rendering it a movie with touches of irrelevant objectification and misogyny” (Sampson 2015).



Figure Three

Scenes that Megan Fox star in include typical examples of the male gaze. The scene that the image above is taken from shows Fox’s body first, a slow pan before we reach her face. Fox is reduced to her body and since this is the audience’s introduction to her it conveys that her appearance is the most important characteristic she possesses. As well as it being the first thing the audience see of

her, we see the male lead observing her and noticing her, enforcing that Fox is a passive object.



Figure Four

When analysing cinema with the male gaze, often The Bechdel Test can go hand in hand with it.

Popularised by the comic strip 'Dykes to Watch Out For' made by cartoonist Alison Bechdel, the strip shows one woman explain to another her three rules when seeing a film: "(1) it has to have at least two women in it, who (2) who talk to each other, about (3) something besides a man." (The Bechdel Test List, 2021)

To reference Bay's 2007 Transformers movie, as well as subjecting Fox's character to the male gaze, the movie also fails the Bechdel test by making Fox's character arc dependent on being only the female love interest: her story revolves only around the central male lead. These messages are hugely damaging to young women as it enforces the internalized male gaze that is built into most all women. The depiction of Megan Fox conveys to young women that the way you look and being sexy is the most interesting thing about you- it is how you get male interest.

Whilst movies such as Transformers do not claim to be the role model for healthy relationships and strong female characters, movies that may do- such as the romantic comedy genre- have the power to influence young women's expectations on love and relationships. Rom-coms use toxic tropes such as the idea that, if the male lead leaves the female lead, he will come back, and the female lead

should let him- no matter what he may have done to hurt her. This trope can be seen in the popular 1989 movie When Harry Met Sally.

The danger of having men leading the production of rom coms comes with the female leads being viewed from a male perspective. The men writing these movies write what they THINK women want, without actually really knowing.

Social-Media

there are now 4.20 billion social media users around the world. This figure has grown by 490 million over the past 12 months... The number of social media users is now equivalent to more than 53 percent of the world's total population.
(Kemp, 2021)

In the 21st century arguably the most popular form of visual media, is social media. With over half of the world's population having access to social media, the UK is home to "53 million active social media users as of January 2021" (Tankovska, 2021), and those "between the ages of 18-34 – accounting for more than 80% of total users" (Talkwalker, 2021).

Social media has completely changed the game in terms of self-expression but also marketing, and due to the personal nature of apps like Facebook and Instagram, it has never been so easy for young women to be under the guise of the male gaze once more.

Using Instagram as the key example in this section, the popular photo-sharing app subverts what we know of the male gaze in film and traditional media. Whereas referenced before in Michael Bay's Transformers, Bay and his predominantly male team have the power to objectify and sexualise Megan Fox's character- but on social media, our internet personas are driven by our internalized male gaze. We judge other people, as they would judge us, and that perspective is accepted, we as users have volunteered our position here.

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines

not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed is female. Thus she turns herself into an object of vision: a sight. (Berger, 1972)

When watching Hollywood movies, young women will be exposed to comparing the thought of themselves to the actresses they see, but there is a level of understanding that looking the way they do is part of their job. The difference with Instagram is now young girls are comparing themselves to people that they already know, people that are in their year of school or university- the playing field is different, social media changes the dynamic of the gaze.

Along with following their friends, young women are susceptible to the pictures of enormous celebrities and influencers, the most notable being the Kardashian family. Each female Kardashian member has been able to create a career off of their own looks, which in a way reclaims some power from men- if men were going to objectify their bodies anyway, why shouldn't they make their own money off of that male gaze? However, the issues lie in the standards that they set as that ideal look.



Figure Five

In April of 2021 Khloe Kardashian had a bikini photo leaked of her online, the photo in question seemed perfectly normal. It was an in-shape woman smiling by the pool, maybe you would see

something similar in a friend's holiday photo album, but the way the image was handled after it leaked speaks volumes to what a woman's internalised male gaze leads up to believe and act.

Kardashian's team "had been rushing to 'scrub [the photo] from the internet" (McLaren, 2021) and Khloe Kardashian herself posted a lengthy statement not of self-acceptance, but of how hard she's worked to have the body she does- "take that criticism to use as motivation to get myself in the best shape of my life" (Kardashian, 2021). The statement is completely damaging and perpetuates to women that your most comfortable and natural self, maybe is not your best self, you can always work harder to look the ideal way. It's Khloe Kardashian's prerogative to look however she pleases, but it cannot go ignored that those standards she enforces were put there by men- "The single standard of beauty for women dictates that they must go on having clear skin. Every wrinkle, every line, every grey hair, is a defeat" (Sontag, 1978).

This damaging message to send out to her (at the time) 136 million followers, only imposes further unrealistic body standards and how those body standards that the Kardashians have created, can transform into serious eating disorders.

"According to the National Eating Disorder Association, a recent study of women between the ages of 18 and 25 showed a link between Instagram and increased self-objectification and body image concerns" (Magnolia Creek, 2019)

If we as a society cannot work on letting go of the male gaze, and our internalized male gaze, it is going to keep continuing to affect young women's psyche, and that is a complete disservice to the girls of the future.

After researching this topic in depth, there is so much more that could be said and explored that # could not be fit into this essay. I would very much like to continue delving into this topic in my third year and researching the effects of the male gaze on young women further.

Figures

Fig. One: Millais, J (1852) Photograph found at:

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-ophelia-n01506>

[Accessed 9/05/2021]

Fig. Two: Waterhouse, J (1888) Photograph found at:

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/waterhouse-the-lady-of-shalott-n01543>

[Accessed 9/05/2021]

Fig. Three: Paramount Pictures (2007) Photograph found at:

<https://screencrush.com/transformers-4-megan-fox/>

[10/05/2021]

Fig. Four: Bechdel, A (1985) Photograph found at:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bechdel_test

[10/05/2021]

Fig. Five: The Sun (2021) Photograph found at:

<https://www.thesun.co.uk/tvandshowbiz/celebrities/14559656/khloe-kardashian-leaked-bikini-photo-revealed-scrubbed-internet/>

[11/05/2021]

Bibliography

Ansari, H (2020) An Enquiry Into Internalised Male Gaze: Whose Camera Is It Anyway? Feminism India. [website]

< <https://feminisminindia.com/2020/10/14/male-gaze-camera-internalized-patriarchy/> >

[Accessed 10/05/2021]

Bechdel Test Movie List (2021) About Page. Bechdel Test Movie List. [website]

< <https://bechdeltest.com/> >

[Accessed 10/05/2021]

Berger, J (1972) Ways of Seeing. [PDF]

< <http://waysofseeingwaysofseeing.com/ways-of-seeing-john-berger-5.7.pdf> >

[Accessed 11/05/2021]

Frey, A (2020) The Women of Pre- Raphaelite Art. Art and Object. [website]

< <https://www.artandobject.com/articles/women-pre-raphaelite-art> >

[Accessed 09/05/2021]

Jones, C (2018) Social Media and the Digital Gaze. Medium. [website]

< <https://medium.com/s/story/social-media-and-the-gaze-d107327a5c90> >

[Accessed 12/05/2021]

Kardashian, K (2021) [quote taken from a now deleted instagram post] quote can be found:

< <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-9448055/Khloe-Kardashian-strips-defend-attempt-kill-unflattering-unfiltered-viral-photo.html> >

[Accessed 12/05/2021]

Kemp, S (2021) Digital 2021: Global Overview Report. Data Reportal. [website]

< <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-global-overview-report> >

[Accessed 12/05/2021]

Magnolia Creek (2019) Social Media's Impact on Eating Disorders. Magnolia Creek. [website]

< <https://www.magnolia-creek.com/eating-disorder-recovery-blog/social-media-and-eating-disorders/> >

[Accessed 12/05/2021]

Mclaren, B (2021) There's Nothing Wrong With That 'Unedited' Khloé Kardashian Bikini Photo. Grazia. [website]

< <https://graziadaily.co.uk/celebrity/news/khloe-kardashian-unedited-instagram-bikini-photo/> >
[Accessed 12/05/2021]

Montpelier, R (2018) Study: The Number of Women Screenwriters in the UK has Barely Changed in 10 Years. Women and Hollywood. [website]
< <https://womenandhollywood.com/study-the-number-of-women-screenwriters-in-the-uk-has-barely-changed-in-10-years/> >
[Accessed 11/05/2021]

Mulvey, L (1975) Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema [ebook]
< <https://www.asu.edu/courses/fms504/total-readings/mulvey-visualpleasure.pdf> >
[Accessed 7/05/2021]

Sampson, R (2015) Film Theory 101- Laura Mulvey: The Male Gaze. Film Inquiry. [website]
< <https://www.filminquiry.com/film-theory-basics-laura-mulvey-male-gaze-theory/> >
[Accessed 7/05/2021]

Sawhney, P (2006) Pre-Raphaelites, Aesthetes, and Decadents. Victorian Web. [website]
< <https://victorianweb.org/painting/prb/sawhney.html> >
[Accessed 7/05/2021]

Sontag, S (1978) The Double Standard of Aging. [ebook]
https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_Other_Within_Us/pf7EDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=the+double+standard+of+aging&pg=PA19&printsec=frontcover
[Accessed 10/05/2021]

Stoll, J (2021) Share of Female Directors from 2007 to 2019. Statista. [website]
< <https://www.statista.com/statistics/289693/share-of-female-directors-in-hollywood/#:~:text=Share%20of%20female%20film%20directors%20in%20Hollywood%202019&text=In%202019%2C%2010.6%20percent%20of,reported%20in%20the%20previous%20year.> >
[Accessed 11/05/2021]

Talkwalker (2021) Social Media Statistics in the UK. Talkwalker. [website]
< <https://www.talkwalker.com/blog/social-media-statistics-in-the-uk#:~:text=As%20is%20to%20be%20expected,than%2080%25%20of%20total%20users.>
[Accessed 12/05/2021]

Tate (2021) Pre- Raphaelite – Art Term. Tate. [website]
< <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/pre-raphaelite> >
[6/05/2021]

Tankovska, H (2021) Active Social Media Users in the United Kingdom (UK) 2021. Statista. [website]
< [https://www.statista.com/statistics/507405/uk-active-social-media-and-mobile-social-media-users/#:~:text=The%20United%20Kingdom%20\(UK\)%20was,the%20population%20of%20the%20UK.&text=The%20level%20of%20social%20media,puts%20it%2022nd%20overall%20worldwide.>](https://www.statista.com/statistics/507405/uk-active-social-media-and-mobile-social-media-users/#:~:text=The%20United%20Kingdom%20(UK)%20was,the%20population%20of%20the%20UK.&text=The%20level%20of%20social%20media,puts%20it%2022nd%20overall%20worldwide.>) >
[Accessed 12/05/2021]

Well, T (2017) Taking Back The Male Gaze. Psychology Today.
< <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/the-clarity/201711/taking-back-the-male-gaze#:~:text=They%20found%20that%20the%20mere,or%20no%20gaze%20at%20all.>> >
[Accessed 9/05/2021]

WGGB (2018) Gender Inequality and Screenwriters [PDF]
< <https://writersguild.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/WGGB-Gender-Inequality-and-Screenwriters-Report.pdf> >
[Accessed 11/05/2021]