

Title: The Objectification of Women in  
Visual Culture: The Male Gaze Across  
Media

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## Abstract

This Dissertation examines how women are objectified across visual culture along with how the male gaze sustains this through advertising, film, television and beauty standards. Analysing Alice Roberts' concept of 'visual priors' alongside Robert Fantz's research on innate visual preferences, I argue that biology may shape our attention but culture shapes the meaning behind the attention. Using Laura Mulvey and John Bergers ideas on the male gaze and how women are presented in visual culture, I explore objectification in the media, advertising along with film and TV, before looking into creatives that resist these ideals such as Greta Gerwig, Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger.

## Introduction

The objectification of women in visual culture is an issue that has been prominent throughout history and is still present today. Oxford English Dictionary describes it as 'the action of treating or viewing someone in a way that disregards their individuality or humanity, especially by considering them only in terms of their sexual attractiveness or availability.' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025) This ideal is rooted in patriarchal structures that have often positioned men as active viewers and women as passive subjects to be viewed, this is where the ideal of the male gaze comes from. In this essay I will be discussing the objectification of women in visual culture and how the male gaze is linked or effects this ideology, I will also explore how women are used as commodities in media and advertising along with how this manifests in the movie industry and other visual media.

## Chapter 1

Women have long been objectified in visual culture. This sexism appears to run so deep that it raises an important question: is the objectification of women something biologically innate, or is it something we learn through social and cultural influence? In other words, is objectification part of human nature, or a product of nurture shaped by the media and the world around us? The idea of what Alice Roberts refers to as 'visual priors' sits at the heart of the nature vs nurture debate, offering a way to examine how both biology and culture shape our visual behaviour from the earliest stages of life (2021).

In writing about 'visual priors', Alice Roberts defines them as 'a selection mechanism that determines our earliest visual content'. (Roberts, 2021) Roberts suggests that

the way in which we perceive things we see are not purely objective, she implies that what we see is warped by our memories, experiences and culture. She explains that 'objectification can occur in early vision, right where perceptual processes meet the world' (Roberts, 2021) which suggests that the way in which we interpret visual information can emerge from very early in development. Roberts proposes that 'visual priors' not only help us to recognise familiar faces, but also biases the way that we think we see. This supports the idea that cultural and environmental influences, especially the media, shape the perceptual habits we mistake for natural vision. Babies learn how to act by watching the world and copying what they see; if what they see is a culture saturated with objectified representations of women, they will inevitably absorb and reproduce those biases as they grow.

Although theorists like Roberts suggest that objectification in visual culture comes from learnt experience and influence from places such as the media, many people believe that 'visual priors' are innate. The work of Robert L. Fantz provides key evidence for this. In a scientific experiment, Fantz researched the idea that babies have innate visual biases or preferences. He did this by presenting a baby with images, some which included face shapes and some which didn't, he found that the babies showed favour in the face shapes, he also found that babies preferred things such as curved lines over straight and high contrast shapes. Fantz proves that babies have visual preferences which supports the nature argument which describes visual preferences as something that is innate. Fantz concluded that 'it is innate but that maturation and learning play important roles in its development' (Fantz, 1961), which means that he discovered that we are all born with a baseline of visual preferences, however the objectifying biases are learnt through influences.

Fantz's study shows that humans possess innate visual preferences especially for faces, contrast and curves, these innate tendencies don't automatically lead to objectification. They do however create a foundation of attention that culture later builds upon. In other words, biology determines what naturally captures our gaze, but it does not determine the social meanings to what we see.

While Fantz explained how visual preferences suggest innate roots, they seem to be developed by influences from the media and world around us. Feminist theorists such as Laura Mulvey discuss how the theory of the male gaze reveals how those cultural biases operate within visual media. Mulvey plays into John Bergers idea of men being portrayed as active viewers and women as being passive objects to be looked at (2008), when she says 'In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.' (1975). She is describing women as being used as passive objects of visual pleasure for men. This shows that although humans may naturally orient towards faces and bodies, it is the patriarchal nature of society that turns this neutral innocent attention into sexualised hierarchical looking. Mulvey communicates that objectification is not simply a perceptual by-product but instead a culturally produced way of seeing, embedded in how images are taken and consumed.

Together, Fantz and Mulvey demonstrate how nature and nurture interact within visual culture. Humans may innately attend to human bodies and faces, but it is the patriarchal organisation of society that transforms this attention into sexualised, hierarchical looking. The debate between nature and nurture does not propose a simple either/or, instead it reveals the complex interplay between biological predispositions and cultural systems of meaning that shape how we see, and learn to objectify, women in visual culture.

## Chapter 2

One major way in which the objectification of women in visual culture is prevalent is in advertising. John Bergers view that women are seen as passive objects to be looked at by the active male viewer (2008), can be seen clearly in a lot of advertisements that frame women as decorative, available and visually consumable. Advertising also shows Laura Mulvey's ideas of the 'male gaze' (1975), as it frequently constructs women's bodies for the pleasure of a male spectator. In this chapter, I will examine how advertising not only reproduces these theories but also normalises them within everyday visual culture.

Advertising often constructs women as objects of male pleasure, a dynamic that becomes clear when viewed through Laura Mulvey's theory of the 'male gaze' (1975). Mulvey argues that mainstream visual culture assumes the viewer is male, so images are made in order that men look and women are looked at. This is made evident when she states 'In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.' (Mulvey, 1975). This renders women as passive, consumable, and ornamental rather than active autonomous people with the ability to act, decide or have intentions. This logic can be clearly seen in advertising campaigns like Tom Fords fragrance ad from 2007. (Figs 1&2)



*Figure 1*

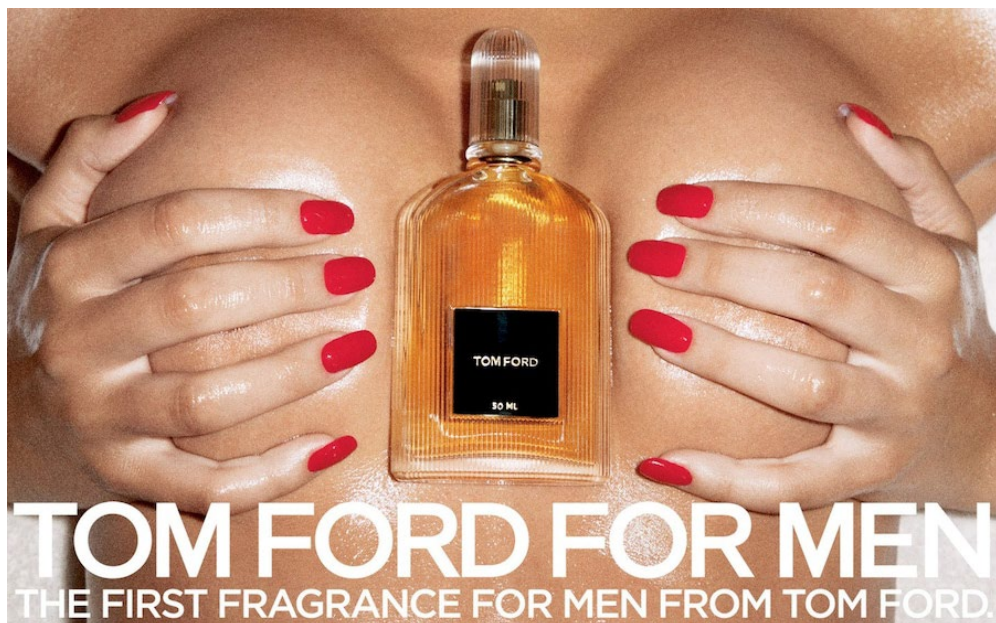


*Figure 2*

In these adverts it is abundantly clear that the woman is positioned to be looked at for the male gaze, if the provocatively positioned fragrance bottles didn't give this away, the bold text underneath which reads 'Tom Ford For Men' does. The gaze of

the camera purposefully lingers on this woman's body rather than her expression, personality or actions. This turns her into a curated spectacle designed to please the heterosexual male viewer. The woman's body is being used as a mere surface to advertise a product that is placed seductively on her carefully positioned body. Her face and any recognisable features have been purposefully cropped out in a seeming act to remove any individuality or sign of agency, this automatically locates the 'male' viewer in a position of control and judgement.

Ultimately, the aesthetic choices within these adverts (e.g. camera angles, framing, lighting) work together to maintain a system in which women's identities are merely reduced to their visual appeal, which sustains the long-standing tradition of gender biased looking in visual culture. Another example of women being used as commodities is the BMW advert entitled 'You Know You're Not The First' which features a woman posed laying down with a seductive expression on her face.



### *Figure 3*

The implications made in this advert are deeply problematic; not only is it degrading and objectifying, but it also compares women to a used car. The message suggests that if a man is comfortable “using” a woman who is not a virgin, he should likewise be comfortable purchasing a second-hand car. This comparison sheds light on the profoundly sexist idea that a woman’s value, like that of purchasable products, diminishes with use. Instead of using photos of said cars to advertise, BMW decided to use an objectifying image of a young woman, seductively posed for the view of the male target audience. This turns the captured woman into an object used to lure in male attention rather than an individual with agency, this reinforces the idea of women being mere objects for male enjoyment. Madeline Novak in her article on this very advert likens the woman photographed to a ‘barbie doll’ (Novak, 2018) which implies that she is displaying unnaturally perfect and unachievable looks. The comparison by Novak not only emphasises the sexualisation of the woman in this advert, but also dehumanises her, it presents her as a flawless, inanimate figurine whose only purpose is to be looked at. Which links to John Bergers idea that women exist to be looked at.

‘Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another. Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated.’ (Berger, 2008).

By suggesting that a woman’s ‘sense of being’ becomes dependent on how she is appreciated by others, specifically men, he highlights how patriarchal visual culture teaches women to internalise the gaze. Berger talks about how women learn to see themselves from the outside, evaluating their bodies according to the male gaze and

its expectations. This BMW advert encapsulates this idea perfectly, the woman is polished and posed in a specific way to attract a male consumer rather than to express any personal identity, the humanity has been removed and replaced with objectification. She is being treated as a visual commodity rather than a person, and the viewer is invited to judge her worth in the same way they may assess the car. Bergers quote therefore sheds light on how advertising such as this does more than simply objectify, instead it reinforces the cultural hierarchy in which women are controlled and judged through their appearance.

### Chapter 3

Film and media form one of the most powerful and influential forms of visual culture, they play a significant role in shaping how women are viewed and represented in society. While advertising offers clear examples of women being used as commodities, the film industry embeds objectification more subtly through narrative, character construction and camera angles. This is arguably more lethal as it happens so subtly that it subconsciously changes the way you see things. Laura Mulvey's theory of the 'male gaze' is particularly crucial when analysing cinema, as she argues that mainstream film is built around a viewing position that assumes the spectator is male. This framework positions men as active lookers and women as passive spectators (Laura Mulvey, 1975), meaning that women on screen are often valued primarily for their appearance rather than their agency. By analysing key cinematic examples, it becomes evident that film not only reflects patriarchal ideas, but also reinforces and normalises them in everyday visual culture.

Mulvey's concept of the male gaze is central to understanding how cinema produces and reinforces objectifying representations of women. She argues that mainstream

film is structured around 'Three looks' which are 'that of the camera ... that of the audience... and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion.'

(Mulvey, 1975). Together, these looks create a system in which visual pleasure is organised through a patriarchal lens that prioritises male desire over most everything else, which aligns with Mulvey's theory of active male viewer and passive female to be viewed, (1975). Classic Hollywood cinema depends on this structure to organise visual pleasure, positioning women to be looked at and men as the conveyors of narrative meaning. A well-known example of this idea in Hollywood cinema would be the James Bond franchise, where Bond carries the plot and narrative of the film and the overly sexualised 'Bond girls' are carefully posed in minimal clothes where the camera slowly pans over their bodies. This example shows that the importance of the visual pleasure outweighs any narrative agency of these characters. Female characters often function as eroticised images who's appearance often "freeze(s) the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation," (Mulvey, 1975) which disrupts the narrative progression in favour of visual desire. This framework of male characters carrying the cinematic narrative and women being the visually desired characters, embeds patriarchal power into the very nature of cinema, it normalises a gendered hierarchy of seeing that has always shaped visual culture and will continue to unless something changes.

Along with cinema, television continues to reproduce many similar visual strategies that objectify women and use them as commodities for the male gaze. Many TV shows frequently rely on the sexualised framing of young female characters along with scenes that purposefully linger on bodies to seize the attention of male viewers. Long-running shows such as *Love Island* use women's bodies as a marketing tool, it

showcases women wearing bikinis in slow-motion shots that clearly emphasise physical appearance over any sign of personality or agency.



*Figure 4*

While this advertising image features near-nude men along with women, the focus is clearly on the women photographed. The women are positioned in the foreground, while the men in the background are partially obscured by the female contestants, this compositional choice clearly is to use the females bodies to draw in the viewers attention. This careful positioning frames the women as the primary objects of visual consumption, their deliberate posing also shows that they are being sexualised, the hands on hips with arched backs to emphasise certain body parts along with parted lips and direct eye contact with the camera all signal sexual availability, specifically crafted to draw in male viewers. In a stark contrast, the male contestants are posed in the background, behind the women, serving to enhance the desirability of the women rather than competing for the attention.

Although the inclusion of male bodies could arguably be seen as inclusion and a form of equality, this image obviously operates within the male-gaze framework. The women's bodies are more exposed and taking up more of the frame, there is also four women and only three men, this could be a coincidence, but this along with many other signs of women being sexualised leads me to believe that this was a careful choice made. The brightly coloured heart back-drop of the image adds a playful nature to an otherwise heavily sexual photograph, this seems to reduce and turn the idea of romance and intimacy into a playful, commodified aesthetic which features female bodies as the main selling point. This image exemplifies how media can often seem to be working towards equality, whereas in actual reality it is reinforcing the age old patriarchal hierarchy of visual culture.

This pattern is not confined to reality TV like *Love Island*, it is also seen across scripted Television. Mulvey's ideas on gaze structure, "active/male and passive/female" (1975), in classical cinema is also applicable to modern TV. An example of a scripted Television show that shows this structure is *Game of Thrones*, which became widely criticised for its repeated use of unnecessary female nudity. In an interview reported on by The Guardian, *Game of Thrones* actor Emilia Clarke calls for more male nudity, this article talks about a study done on season 6 which included thirty times more female nudity than male (Monkey, 2016). These nude scenes often did not add anything to the narrative of the storyline, but instead worked as an object for visual pleasure rather than agents within the story, which reinforces the idea of the patriarchal hierarchy of visual culture. This aligns with Bergers statement that women in visual culture are conditioned to internalise being looked at, while men are positioned as active viewers (Berger, 2008).

These examples prove that modern day television doesn't merely go along with the historical male centred mode of looking but also actively works to reinforce it and sustain it.

Unrealistic beauty standards for women is something that has been widely promoted for decades. The media presents a very narrow version of what is considered 'beautiful' for women, this 'ideal body' changes every few years but often consists of slim, toned bodies with perfectly symmetrical faces. Some examples of the changes seen in what the 'ideal body' looks like would be in the 90s – early 2000s the goal was to be as slim and toned as possible, which was promoted heavily by celebrities and models influential at that time, then in the 2010s the style was to have more curves which Kim Kardashian brought into fashion, now in the mid 2020s weight loss drugs are all the rage with many celebrities fashioning very slim frames once again. The change in what is considered the 'perfect body' shows how superficial the trends really are and reinforces the idea that women's bodies are objects to be moulded and evaluated rather than accepted as natural or autonomous.

John Berger talks about how women are socialised to "appear" rather than "act" which teaches that their value lies in how they look rather than who they are personally (2008). This idea aligns itself well with how women are socialised to believe they should look in today's society.

These beauty unrealistic standards are presents everywhere across television, film, advertising and social media, which is dangerous because it begins to appear normal and attainable, despite being unnatural and unachievable for most women. Digital editing also aids the unrealistic beauty standards, it is a widely known fact that all areas of the media use filters or enhancers to make women look 'better' in

images. Women are encouraged and expected to alter the way that they look to keep up with the ever changing beauty trends, which promotes a culture of self-judgement, this concept is backed up by Berger who wrote “A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself.” (2008). Ultimately, the unrealistic beauty standards enforced on women function as a form of control which sustains patriarchal views and values by ensuring that women are too preoccupied with their appearance to worry about their sense of agency or individuality.

## Chapter 4

As humans we are heavily influenced by what we see, as previously discussed and proved by Alice Roberts’ view on ‘visual priors’ (2021), some of the major visual influences in modern day include advertising along with TV and film. As stated many examples of media showcase the objectification and commodification of women, along with the patriarchal hierarchy, these ideals are therefore subconsciously influencing the way in which we see everything. Due to the structure of visual pleasure in the media, we see everything through an objectifying lens, this is very dangerous because it normalises the ideals of women being a spectacle for male enjoyment. It also negatively impacts the way women see themselves, the media conditions us to believe women should be airbrushed, with the perfect body and hair, which isn’t sustainable or achievable for people. These unrealistic body standards for women create a kind of self-objectification, where women don’t deem themselves as being good enough if they cannot reach this unattainable level of beauty.

## Counter cultural representations

While most of visual culture works to reinforce the objectification of women through the male gaze, some artists and film makers are working hard to go against this and resist these archaic patriarchal ideals. Rather than positioning women as mere passive objects of visual pleasure, these creatives are prioritising females holding narratives, agency and identity. In doing so, they force the viewers to reflect on their positions as spectators and challenge the structural concepts discussed by Mulvey and Berger, which shed light on how objectification is produced and sustained in visual culture.

A modern-day example of this counter-cultural representation of women in cinema would be *The Barbie Movie* which premiered in 2023. Although *Barbie* has historically functioned as an idealised, hyper-polished, feminised object for visual consumption, Greta Gerwig's film switches this narrative and frames *Barbie* as a site of criticism. The film acknowledges and critiques the unrealistic beauty standards imposed on women by the patriarchy and poses *Barbie* as a character who becomes increasingly aware of her role in these downgrading standards both in the fictional world and real world. Where traditional Hollywood cinema would highlight a female character for her visual pleasure and sexualised nature, *Barbie* focus' on the characters narrative and emotional development. This film further disrupts the traditional gender roles in cinema by exposing the absurdity of the harmful patriarchal structures, which forces viewers to question why *Barbie* exists as an object at all. Gerwig's film clearly demonstrates that working against the traditional patriarchal roles in film does not have to come at the cost of the femininity or beauty of a character, but rather a shift in narrative and meaning, which is something that is very empowering to women.

Cindy Sherman also works to challenge how women are represented in visual culture, she specialises in self-portraits in her work *Untitled Film Stills*, she manages to both adopt the visual language of classic cinema while at the same time undermining it. Because she works in self-portraiture, she positions herself as the subject and the creator of her work, which allows her full control over what she produces and removes the tradition of women being photographed by men. Her images mimic stereotypes of women found in film and media but deny the viewer the narrative closure or overly sexualised versions found elsewhere.



Figure 5

Sherman utilises the ability to appear ambiguous and distant along with therefore seeming to resist passive consumption, which allows the viewer to become acutely aware of themselves and how they see the images, she transforms the act of looking into an uncomfortable, self-reflective experience. She achieves this by not looking directly into the camera lens, often looking elsewhere over her shoulder or into the unseen distance, Sherman also appears showing small amounts of skin, but not enough to make the image provocatively charged.

Similarly, artist Barbara Kruger confronts the male gaze in a much more direct way, she uses black and white imagery and overlays them with bold red and white text, which exposes the power struggle between men and women in visual culture.

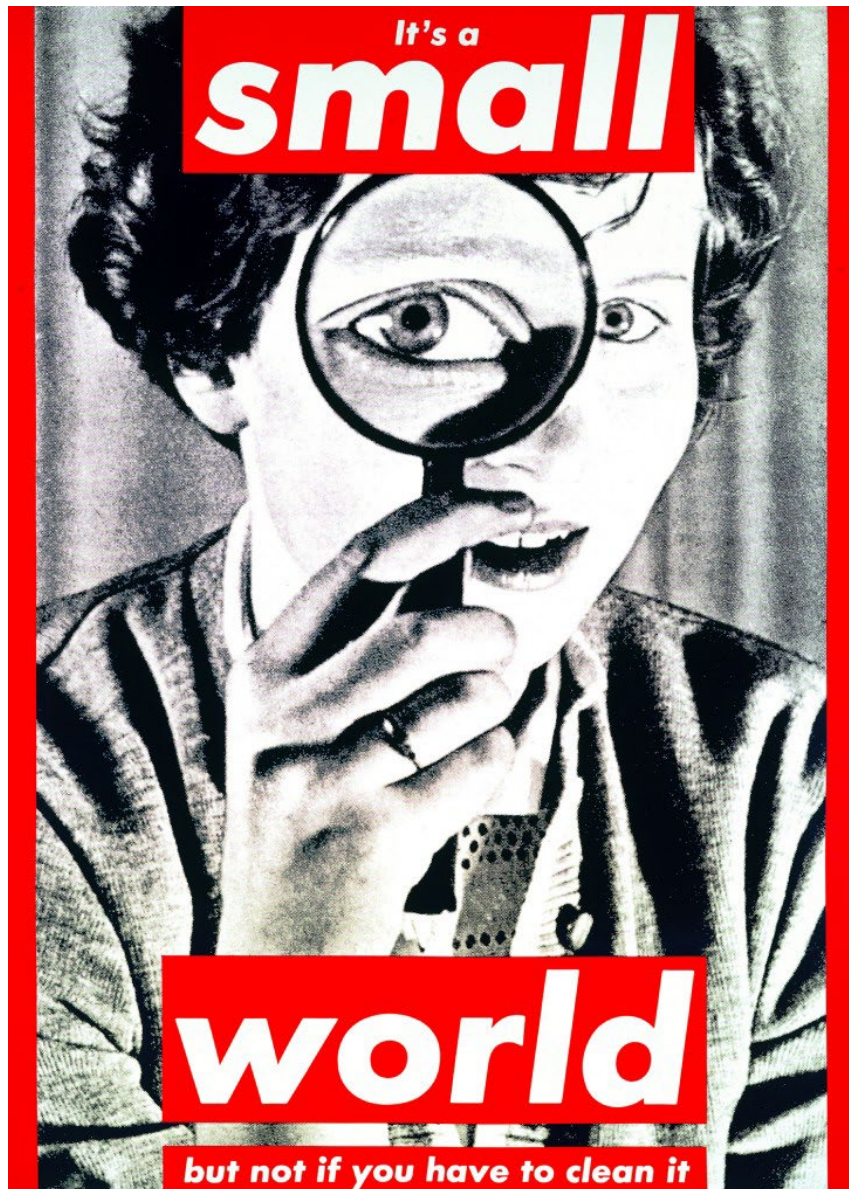


*Figure 6*

In her work which includes the text 'it's a small world but not if you have to clean it', Kruger is explicitly targeting gender roles enforced by patriarchal society, this text mixed with the image featuring a woman holding a magnifying glass encourages the viewer to look deeper into imagery they see every day. Unlike advertising, which relies on aesthetic pleasure and passivity, Kruger's work uses bold text and quotes to interrupt visual consumption. The text forces the viewer to interact with her work intellectually rather than erotically. By reclaiming the narrative lost in many artworks

featuring women, Kruger uses strongly worded text to challenge the silence surrounding women who in art, exist to merely please men.

Together, these examples demonstrate that objectification in visual culture is not inevitable, it is instead a constructed system that can be resisted and changed.

Gerwig, Sherman and Kruger all return agency to women by exposing the male gaze and its danger. Their work transforms women from objects used merely for the pleasure of the male gaze, to subjects with narrative and agency. This resistance, demonstrated by these women, is crucial in showing that the objectification seen in visual culture does not have to take place, it is not something that comes with producing visual work, it is a composition that is enforced by the patriarchal society that we live in.

## Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the objectification of women within visual culture and examined how the male gaze operates across advertising, film, television and media. It looked at the nature versus nurture debate, it has argued that while humans possess innate visual preferences, as discusses by Fantz, objectification itself is not biologically determined. Instead, as Alice Roberts' concept of 'visual priors' demonstrates, the meanings attached to what we see are culturally learned and reinforced through the repeated exposure to objectifying imagery that influences the way we see things. Visual culture therefore plays a vital role in shaping how women are perceived, valued and treated.

Through theoretical frameworks of Laura Mulvey and John Berger, this dissertation has shown how women are consistently positioned as passive objects of visual pleasure, while men are constructed as active viewers and bearers of narrative

meaning (2008). This dynamic is visible in advertising, where women's bodies are consistently used as commodities to sell products, and in film and television, where cinematic techniques such as framing, editing and narrative structure prioritise male desire. The unrealistic beauty standards further intensifies this issue, encouraging women to internalise the gaze and examine their own appearance as suggested by Berger.

However this dissertation has also discussed how these biases are not inevitable, they can be challenged and avoided. Through works of Barbara Kruger and Sherman alternative options were explored. Ultimately, to conclude, objectification of women is something that is ever present in visual culture, however this is something that can be changed and something we should be striving to change, as the impact that this has can be detrimental on how women perceive themselves.

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