

The gaze is a concept that flourished in feminist theory and other branches of academia largely due to Laura Mulvey's paper, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. In this work, Mulvey identified and analyzed power asymmetries portrayed not only in film but also by the producers of film itself, thus demonstrating that film and its narrative is a microcosm of larger societal disparities demarcated by sex. While many forms of the gaze are constructed by particular camera shots in an omniscient form or through the male gaze on a female body in person, the type of gaze I would like to focus on involves the male gaze not towards a female body, but a literal object/picture representation of a female or female body. Put simply, my interest is in the male gaze of an *image* of a female as opposed to just a female. This gaze in most forms of media is overtly heterosexual and sheds light on power dynamics relating to gender, permission structures, and notions of possession.

In this paper I will briefly explain origins of the gaze separate from Mulvey's work, introduce the gaze of a female image through three different media moments, and then discuss a scene at length from one of these works to elucidate the form and significance of the male to female image gaze.

In writing, the concept of "the gaze" was first coined by Jean-Paul Sartre in his work *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre constructs a scenario in which an individual phenomenologically perceives themselves (as most people normally do due to our cognitive architecture) as the center of the universe. This phenomenologically egocentric individual notices another person looking at them, and as a result, the centrality of the first individual's own subjectivity suddenly shifts. Sartre likens this to a sinkhole that is created by the realization of this intersubjectivity. No longer is the individual a master

subject whose universe only exists and is made intelligible through their illuminating vision, but they themselves have become a subject of the gaze of the other. To gender this notion, a female may exist with phenomenological freedom, but their subjective centrality is shifted as a result of the gaze of the other.

This is obviously not unique to non-fiction, and even film; In Dostoevsky's book, *The Idiot* (1869), two of the main characters become infatuated with a dangerous and unstable socialite upon looking at a beautiful picture of her. In NBC's *The Office* (2005), Michael Scott, the zany and childish protagonist, goes on an obsessive hunt for a desk chair model whom he saw in a magazine. Thirdly, and the primary source of media that inspired this inquiry, A24's *Swiss Army Man*, a corpse and a lonely man are on a mission to reunite with a woman only known to them through a cell phone screen (though this is not the scene that will be emphasized).

In all three of these examples, the viewer is a participant in the fantastical gaze being performed by the protagonist. Despite having the gaze mediated by a fictional character, it is still pleasurable to the viewer, and the act of possession and longing seen in the character is alive and well. Furthermore, the viewer may feel more comfortable partaking in the gaze through naive and outrageous characters (whether they be socially inept princes, incompetent business managers, or corpses), signing off the characters' gazes as immature and inappropriate while secretly enjoying them just as much if not more.

It is also worth noting that these gazes demonstrate a fantasy of possession that goes far beyond the erotic or sexual, with each character dreaming of a long life with the other in the image, wishing not only for youthful pleasures, but the satisfaction of

growing old with another. In this case, it appears that the female in the image is not merely a sexual means to satiate the gaze, but an end in itself that is inherently sexual but also moves beyond sexuality (though still innately having possessive force). This act of possession or desire for it is a dissective one, not necessarily by separating a female into bodily parts via camera, but by dissecting and extracting a fantasy essence of a female from the female herself. An image is only a shallow imitation of an infinitely complex individual, and this vacuous space provided by an image makes it possible for anyone gazing upon the it to pour their own meanings and desires into it.

The permission structure of the gaze via pictures and images is also worth noting. An image of a woman does not have the power of dissent like that of a living breathing human; for this reason there is largely an absence of any type of this permission structure, and the viewer can gaze as long as they want however they want unless that they themselves are under the scrutinous vision of another individual. This is analogous to the way in which film itself creates a space for carnal and possessive viewing, both voyeuristic and fetishistic.

In these select portrayals of the gaze there are many unifying threads, one of the more ominous and interesting ones being death. At the end of *The Idiot*, Nastassya Filippovna is murdered at the hands of the dangerous and controlling Rogozhin, with Prince Myshkin discovering the scene and doing nothing to turn Rogozhin in. In *The Office*, Michael Scott discovers that the chair model he fantasized about passed away years ago, and visits her grave crafting an impromptu song detailing the life they never shared. In the case of *Swiss Army Man*, the corpse (ironically named Manny) is the one who does the gazing of the playboy magazine along with his fellow adventurer Hank.

*Swiss Army Man* is a film largely about a lonely and insecure man (Hank) who discovers a flatulent corpse (Manny) that comes to life, and together the two escape the wilderness while also experiencing a form existential rejuvenation through personal self-discovery and the transcending of societal norms. One way in which the filmmakers develop the plot of the movie and also engage with this deep social content is through Hank teaching Manny about the world of the living, which he had forgotten. This facet of the story develops as Manny becomes concurrently more lifelike and socially intelligent. One pivotal scene in the movie utilizes the male gaze in order to awaken Manny's long lost sexuality, simultaneously displaying the increasing personhood of Manny while also helping Manny and Hank return home (Manny's penis happens to also function as a compass, encouraging Hank to arouse Manny emotionally).

In this scene, Hank and Manny discover a Playboy magazine, and the woman in the magazine is assigned a name by Hank and Manny, despite certainly having one of her own. This male gaze becomes far more complicated, because it is not only "Jessie's" yellow bikini that arouses Manny, but also the notion of signing a one-year lease and cooking dinner together. This emotional and even teleological euphoria matches with and overflows alongside the physical, literally making Manny become more lifelike. Not only is Manny becoming aroused, but Hank, like the viewer, is living a fantasy vicariously through a corpse ogling at a magazine. Manny initially feels disgust upon discovering he has an erection. This break from the fantasy and subsequent euphoria is similar to the pleasure and shame a viewer simultaneously experiences while partaking in the male gaze. It turns out that Manny's erect penis also serves as a compass, but this paper shall not discuss the symbolic significance of that at length.

In conclusion, the male gaze through the image of a female operates similar to the gaze that Laura Mulvey and Jean-Paul Sartre captured in their own works. However, concepts of possession gain greater gravity and move beyond the erotic as a result of the gazing subject being able to pour their own deeper desires into an image due to a lack of any sort of permission structure. It is my hope that this paper elucidates the concept of the male gaze in a way that moves beyond film while also staying true to the societal and aesthetic implications that Mulvey originally brought attention to.

References:

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

If this link does not work, search the video “A great scene from Daniel Radcliffe’s Swiss Army Man” on YouTube.com

Laura Mulvey; Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, *Screen*, Volume 16, Issue 3, 1 October 1975, Pages 6–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>

Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1966. *Being and nothingness; an essay on phenomenological ontology*. New York: Washington Square Press.