# Material Girls

## *Making Sense of Feminist Cultural Theory*

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# *Visual Pressures*
## *On Gender and Looking*

### "You've Got the Look": The Male Gaze

Much of the recent work in feminist cultural analysis has arisen around issues concerning the relationship between gender and looking. Since "looking" or "sight" is obviously such an important part of the reception of an image, it makes sense to examine the ways in which looking at images is constructed by gendered divisions and the social relations of patriarchal power. This approach is connected to the new concern with how the representations of women function; if it is true that women are so often represented as sexual spectacle, as "on display" for men (which much of the early feminist critique demonstrated), then how does that "work," what are the processes that produce woman as sexual spectacle? In response to this inquiry, feminist cultural criticism has tended to move beyond the question of the sexist context of images and toward an examination of "the mechanisms of viewing."[1]

One of the first theorists to address directly the complex question of looking and its relation to gender was the marxist cultural critic John Berger, who wrote the book and television series titled *Ways of Seeing*. For Berger, patriarchal society entails that a woman be constructed as an object for the "look" of the male spectator, or the male voyeur. Berger focused on how, in our patriarchal culture with its imbalance between male and female power, women are positioned as the passive object of the male look and come to internalize this look:



> She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. . . . *men act* and *women appear.* 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 female. Thus she turns herself into an object of vision: a sight.[2]

Berger argued that looking—which might be considered a relatively neutral activity—actually carries with it relations of power, access, and control. This power is precisely what determines the "difference" of women: "Women are depicted in a quite different way from men—not because the feminine is different from the masculine—but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of woman is designed to flatter him."[3]

*Ways of Seeing* remains an important text for feminist cultural theorists, even though its framework is rooted in the work of the marxist cultural theorist and literary critic Walter Benjamin, and is by no means explicitly feminist in its aims. Rather, its uniqueness lies in its creative and determined efforts to break down the categories of

"high art" and "mass culture" and to show how these classifications and ways of seeing are themselves highly ideological and mystifying.

Berger examined "high art" for its construction of a gendered (and classed) way of seeing, as well as popular advertising. His focus on the classic nude as a precursor to more apparent forms of female objectification found in modern advertising was helpful in pushing cultural criticism to see male power in all kinds of representations, even those considered "high art" and therefore sacrosanct. Berger pointed out that the depiction of the nude female body in classical painting spoke a great deal about sexual politics: "Her body is arranged in the way it is to display it to the man looking at the picture. This picture is made to appeal to *his* sexuality. It has nothing to do with her sexuality."[4] It is also significant that Berger stressed that this process of objectification and masculine control of the image not only reinforced male "property" rights over women, but also produced a female identity that internalized this view of woman as object of male desire, so a woman "comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman."[5]

In introducing the concept of gendered "ways of seeing"—and in developing a historical argument that showed how the female body has been objectified throughout the years—Berger paved the way both for feminist theories of "the gaze" and for the marxist rethinking of popular culture and ideology.

This idea of the male as bearer of the look, as occupying a privileged space in the process of constructing "ways of seeing," has been taken up by feminists of several different intellectual persuasions. Perhaps the most significant, though, is the psychoanalytic inflection offered by



Laura Mulvey in her important article for *Screen* in 1975, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." If Berger convincingly argued that woman has been placed on the passive side of a gendered division of looking, Mulvey raised the theoretical stakes by asking the crucial question of why this is so; what is it about representation in our culture that insists on this active/passive distinction and that perpetuates the dominance of the "male gaze"? Mulvey turned to psychoanalysis, specifically Lacanian psychoanalysis, to provide a complex answer that locates the male gaze both in the particular processes of classic narrative cinema and in the psychological phenomena of scopophilia, voyeurism, and fetishism. As Mary Ann Doane notes, Mulvey's work was decisive:

> A theory of the unconscious was perceived as absolutely crucial to the comprehension of the cinema as the realm of fantasy and desire and the activator of mechanisms of voyeurism and fetishism. Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) provided a paradigm which every feminist film critic henceforth felt obliged to confront precisely because it seemed to demonstrate the "perfect fit" between the concepts and scenarios of psychoanalysis—the Oedipus complex, scopophilia, castration, fetishism, identification—and the cinematic imaging and narrativization of sexual difference.[6]

It is hard to overestimate how central this concept has been for feminist cultural studies. It introduced the issue of male power into the most intimate aspect of the representational process: sight. It moved beyond the notion of stereotypes and claimed that the objectification of women was not an "added on" attraction, but rather endemic to the very structure of image making. Kaja Silverman, writing in the classic collection *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, clearly states the significance

of the concept of the gaze: "It is by now axiomatic that the female subject is the object rather than the subject of the gaze in mainstream narrative cinema. She is excluded from authoritative vision not only at the level of the enunciation, but at that of the fiction. At the same time she functions as an organizing spectacle, as the lack which structures the symbolic order and sustains the relay of male glances."[7]

Mulvey and others have asserted that there are two main pleasures of looking in Hollywood film: voyeurism and fetishism. The voyeur experiences pleasure in seeing without being seen, which is associated with power and control over the image. The eye of the camera is like an eye looking through a peephole: "Voyeurism is a way of taking sexual pleasure by looking at rather than being close to a particular object of desire, like a Peeping Tom. And Peeping Toms can always stay in control. Whatever may be going on, the Peeping Tom can always determine his own meanings for what he sees."[8] Classic examples of this scenario would be Tony Perkins looking through the hole in the wall at an undressing Janet Leigh in *Psycho*, and the scene in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* in which a young man watches, through the slats of a closet door, a woman being raped (Figure 5).

The fetishistic look has to do with the endowment of some object or body part with sexual meaning. Mulvey relied strongly on Freud's essay on fetishism, suggesting that the erotic image of a woman can trigger the memory of the childhood process whereby the boy observes that the mother does not have a penis, thus producing a sense of horror. The fetishism derives from the disavowal and denial of that "castration"—as Gaylyn Studlar puts it, the boy/man turns an object into a "symbolic replacement of the mother's missing penis."[9] In film, this often takes the form of a sexualization of women's bodies or part of their



Figure 5. An innocent young man takes a furtive peek at the sexual escapades of a subjugated woman in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*. (De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 1986; photo courtesy of Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)

bodies, ascribing a phallic connotation to a female body part (legs, breasts) in order to recuperate the woman and rid himself of the threat of otherness generally, and the threat of castration specifically: "Woman as representation signifies castration, inducing voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent her threat."[10]

This fetishistic look is also clearly part of the representation of women in advertising, to the point where a woman is represented only as a body part: "In ads women are frequently represented in a 'fragmented' way. . . . Women are signified by their lips, legs, hair, eyes or hands, which stand, metonymically—the it for the whole—for, in this case, the 'sexual' woman. Men, on the other hand, are less often 'dismembered.'"[11] Indeed, the theory of the

male gaze seems to hold particularly well for advertisements, in which women's bodies are often fragmented, shown as discrete body parts that are meant to represent the whole woman. Women are urged to think of their bodies as "things" that need to be molded, shaped, and remade into a male conception of female perfection. The fragmentation of the female body into parts that should be "improved" or "worked on" often results in women having a self-hating relationship with their bodies. Such fragmentation is closely related to the marketplace and consumerism, thus linking up the powers of looking with the powers of ownership and consumption: "It is the multiplication of areas of the body accessible to marketing. Here, areas not previously seen as sexual have become sexualized. And being sexualized, they come under the scrutiny of the ideal. New areas constructed as sensitive and sexual, capable of stimulation and excitement, capable of attracting attention, are new areas requiring *work* and *products*."[12]

The darkened room of the movie theater sets into motion a set of psychic responses that encourage both a voyeuristic/scopophilic attitude and an ego identification with the characters on the screen. Mulvey argues that woman is created as a spectacle for male desire through the gaze of the camera (seen here as a phallic substitute), the gaze of the men within the narrative, and the gaze of the male spectator, governed by his fear of castration and subsequent fetishization of the female body. This position is summarized by Teresa de Lauretis: "The woman is framed by the look of the camera as icon, or object of the gaze: an image made to be looked at by the spectator, whose look is relayed by the look of the male character(s). The latter not only controls the events and narrative action but is 'the bearer' of the look of the spectator."[13]



There are three "looks" that constitute the male gaze. First is the gaze within the representation itself: men gaze at women, who become objects of the gaze; second, the spectator, in turn, is made to identify with this male gaze and to objectify the woman on the screen; and third, the camera's original "gaze" comes into play in the very act of filming; the camera here can be understood as an extension of the male eye. Mary Devereaux makes an important distinction between "literal and metaphorical" usage of the concept of male gaze: "In literal terms, the gaze is male when men do the looking. Men look both as spectators and as characters within works. In figurative terms, to say that the gaze is male refers to a way of seeing which takes women as its object. In this broad sense, the gaze is male whenever it directs itself at, and takes pleasure in, women, where women function as erotic objects."[14] She notes the distinction between "the three different gazes: that of the filmmaker, the characters within the film and the spectator."[15] First, of course, is the filmmaker. Now, of course, there are female filmmakers, but, regardless of the presence of a few women here and there, proponents of the concept of the male gaze believe that the system of filmmaking is so thoroughly male-dominated and governed by male perspectives that the gaze of the filmmaker remains male even when the person looking through the viewfinder on the camera or editing the rushes is a woman. The same would hold true for other media, particularly fashion photography, where male photographers dominate the field. This issue has been hotly debated, as recent feminists have argued for a "different way of seeing" embodied in films, television shows, and other media directed and/or produced by women.

This idea of the productive gaze as male fits in with much of feminist theory, which describes a female self largely

determined by male values and prescriptions. In such a framework, the female director—herself a "victim" of patriarchal socialization and subject formation—cannot help but see herself through the eyes of the hegemonic male vision. As E. Ann Kaplan notes, male looking is never a simple mirror to a purported female gaze, because it is backed up by real social power: "Men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession which is lacking in the female gaze."[16]

The second aspect of the male gaze concerns the gaze of the male characters within the film. Not only is the entire production of films constructed through male eyes (literal or otherwise), but also the characters in the films tend to treat women as sexualized objects and to control the process of looking: "It is this sense—that the image of the woman in Hollywood film is constructed through scenography, blocking, pacing and so on in order to display her for male erotic contemplation—that feminist, psychoanalytic critics invoke when they say that the gaze in Hollywood film is masculine."[17]

The third aspect of the male gaze concerns spectatorship, and this has proven to be perhaps Mulvey's most contentious point. For she not only assumes the spectator to be male, but also believes that the voyeuristic male spectator is intimately involved in helping to produce woman as object: "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."[18]

An important aspect of Mulvey's argument is the contention that there is no space for an authentic female gaze, because the spectator is inevitably addressed as male, and female viewers are forced to look with the male protagonist; Rosemary Betterton points out that, as a result, "woman as spectator is offered the dubious satisfaction of identification with the heterosexual masculine gaze, voyeuristic, penetrating and powerful."[19] Doane argues that identity itself is unavailable to the female spectator, bound up as it is with the processes of voyeurism and fetishism: "The female spectator . . . in buying her ticket, must deny her sex. There are no images either *for* her or *of* her."[20]



More by implication than by explicit analysis, Mulvey addresses the problem of the female spectator in a visual world constructed for male pleasure. The male viewer may revel in his fetishistic scopophilia, getting pleasure and control from that which he sees from a distance, but the female viewer is condemned to a narcissistic pleasure, or as Betterton describes it, a "pleasure in closeness, in reflection and in identification with an image."[21] In other words, the female gaze (for Mulvey not so much a gaze as a passive spectating position) seems to be characterized either by narcissism or by a kind of masochistic identification with one's own objectification.

Doane further develops the psychoanalytic position that finds women's spectatorship "different" in that women cannot maintain the necessary distance needed to fetishize. While a man, it seems, is "destined to be a fetishist," woman "must find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to assume the position of fetishist. That body which is so close continually reminds her of the castration which cannot be 'fetishized away.'"[22] In this construct, the female spectator is placed in a position of transvestism, in which she is either identifying with the women characters and placed in a passive/masochistic position or identifying with the male hero and masculinized.[23] Doane turns to the idea of "masquerade"—a performing of femininity that reveals its

status as construction—to find some space for female resistance in the destabilization of the male look:

> Above and beyond a simple adoption of the masculine position in relation to the cinematic sign, the female spectator is given two options: the masochism of over-identification or the narcissism entailed in becoming one's own object of desire, in assuming the image in the most radical way. The effectivity of masquerade lies precisely in its potential to manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible, and readable by the woman.[24]

But, as Doane asks, Why can't we simply reverse this gaze, appropriating the pleasure of looking for ourselves? Because the very reversal reinforces the terms of the binary opposition: "The male striptease, the gigolo—both inevitably signify the mechanism of reversal itself, constituting themselves as aberrations whose acknowledgement simply reinforces the dominant system of aligning sexual difference with a subject/object dichotomy. And an essential attribute of that dominant system is the matching of male subjectivity with the agency of the look."[25]

When men become the object of woman's gaze, the woman takes on a "masculine" role as bearer of the gaze and initiator of the action, and she nearly always loses her traditionally feminine characteristics (kindness, humaneness, motherliness).[26] She is often cold, driving, ambitious, and manipulative, just like the men; she may be sexy, like the ruthless Alexis on the television series *Dynasty*, but she loses her "maternal" qualities. Mulvey reconsiders the concept of the male gaze in relation to female spectators in her essay "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' . . . Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*."[27] In this later



writing, Mulvey develops the idea of the "mobile" position of the female spectator, in which the female viewer adopts the "transvestite" position of the masculine hero, thus experiencing (uncomfortably) the power of that position even though she is unable to adopt it fully. We will return to this question of the spectator in chapter 4, as it has proved to be a site of controversy in recent debates.

## Cracks in the Mirror? Implications and Challenges

Feminists working with the theory of the male gaze strongly indicted classic Hollywood cinema as being the primary culprit in producing images of woman as spectacle for male desire. As Noel Carroll points out, "Women are passive; men are active. Men carry the narrative action forward; women are the stuff of ocular spectacle, there to serve as the locus of the male's desire to savor them visually. Indeed, Mulvey maintains, on screen, women in Hollywood film tend to slow down the narrative or arrest the action, since action must often be frozen, for example, in order to pose female characters so as to afford the opportunity for their erotic contemplation."[28] The issue of point of view becomes crucial here, as Mulvey and others argue that the narrative structure and mise-en-scène of classic Hollywood film literally act out the male gaze: "The classic Hollywood film reinforces this message stylistically by confining the spectator to the point of view of the narrative hero."[29]

In addition, Mulvey stresses the relationship between spectacle and narrative:

> In Laura Mulvey's account of visual pleasure in film, the ideal psychic trajectory of the classical cinema involves the interweaving of spectacle and narrative. Within individual

> films there are numerous effects of spectacle, the most obvious of which occur in the musical, whether in the way in which the narrative is frequently subservient to performance, or in the overall preoccupation with theatricality and performance. In a more general way, most classical films create spectacles by defining objects of the look—whether the look of the camera or of protagonists within the film—so as to stage their quality of what Mulvey calls, referring specifically to the female object of the look—their "to-be-looked-at-ness."[30]

For Mulvey, many aspects of popular filmmaking contribute to the construction of the woman as sexualized spectacle, including the kinds of camera shots (close-ups), costuming, lighting, and make-up.

The implications of Mulvey's version of the male gaze are dramatic: a disavowal of narrative cinema and the construction of a feminist avant-garde that destroyed narrative pleasure, a pleasure that, in her reading, was both masochistic and reproductive of male dominance. Indeed, Mulvey herself attempted to produce just such an avant-garde film, *The Riddles of the Sphinx*, made with Peter Wollen. She argued strongly that Hollywood films were bankrupt for feminists, because "the mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portrays a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic phantasy."[31] If the pleasure of film was, for women, always tainted by a male gaze that controlled and objectified, then we must reject that very pleasure. This stricture, too, has evoked intense debate, both for its absolute rejection of those films from which the vast majority of us derive so much pleasure and for its insistence on an avant-garde film practice that only earnest film students seem to enjoy.



Further debate has arisen over the extent to which the notion of the male gaze can be generalized to media other than film. Although the concept of the gaze has been applied successfully to the analysis of advertisements, which so clearly present woman as sexual spectacle, it is more difficult to translate to the medium of television. In its psychoanalytic version, the concept is so connected to signifying practices that depend on a darkened room and a relatively passive and fixed audience that it is questionable to what extent it applies to a medium such as television, where the televised image blurs with the familial surroundings, making the intensity of the directed male gaze much more problematic. Kaplan questions "how well . . . theories about the 'male gaze' apply to watching television, when usually there is no darkened room, where there is a small screen, and where viewing is interrupted by commercials, by people moving about, or by the viewer switching channels."[32]

John Ellis, among others, persuasively argues that the "gaze" is an inaccurate concept for television analysis because the viewer is *not* in the voyeuristic position of the cinema viewer; instead, television itself has the "look": "The viewer for TV is very far from being in a position of producing a totalising vision of the truth from the initial stance of curiosity. For broadcast TV, the regime of viewing is rather one of complicity with TV's own look at the passing pageant of life."[33] On the other hand, if one fully adopts the psychoanalytic viewpoint, which locates the origins of the male gaze in timeless infantile experiences, then the particular medium in which these processes are acted out should not alter the basic mechanism. This disjunction

points to a problem with the psychoanalytic approach, which is unable to pay substantive attention to the differences among particular media forms (but more on that later).

The theory of the male gaze seems particularly relevant for representations that hinge so thoroughly on sexualized imagery and spectacle. The new world of music videos is perhaps such a site, for the short format and often nonnarrative style encourage the production of "spectacles," although numerous theorists have argued that MTV's pastiche of ambiguous, nonnarrative images and sounds often provides a greater variety of "gazes" than those in classical cinema: "The question of visual pleasure is more complicated. The objectification of women for the voyeuristic pleasure of male viewers characteristic of film has been replicated in music videos. But at the same time, creation of a female gaze by women artists is one of the most important trends in music video, suggesting that TV may offer women a space for a new investigation of female spectatorship."[34]

Clearly, Berger's original point about women as the "surveyed" of our culture rings true for various media forms, but the more distinctive concept of the male gaze as it has been used by psychoanalytic feminists raises problems, several of which will be discussed in the following chapters. In addition, Berger's development of the male gaze concept, as noted earlier, has a mixed intellectual heritage, being influenced by marxism, and in particular, the work of Walter Benjamin. But this theory has also been used more deliberately by the Mulvey-influenced feminist film critics, who elaborate the specific processes of scopophilia, fetishism, and voyeurism that were developed originally in a therapeutic/analytic context. Mulvey, along with the legions of feminist cultural critics who came before and after her, is deeply influenced by psychoanalysis and the belief that psychoanalytic concepts (whether strictly Freudian or Lacanian) are particularly appropriate for the analysis of representation. Thus feminist critics are faced with a dual heritage when discussing the male gaze. On the one hand, the term has been used rather generically to describe and analyze the objectification of women in popular culture—the myriad ways women are turned into objects for the pleasure of a male viewer. The theory of the male gaze has broad and commonsense sociological implications regarding the internalization of male standards of beauty and the orientation of women toward male approval and "performance" for male desire.[35]



Rosalind Coward's work on female desires and how they are constructed in a commodity culture relies heavily on (Berger-like) ideas of the "look" and male control of visual imagery. Traversing advertisements, the fashion industry, and the tabloid press, Coward stresses the inhibiting and debilitating results of male-dominant image making, which turns women into objects to be packaged and sold—to men and to themselves.[36] And feminist theorists such as Susanne Kappeler have used the "look" concept to indict representation as the cornerstone of patriarchy: "The fundamental problem at the root of men's behaviour in the world, including sexual assault, rape, wife battering, sexual harassment, keeping women in the home and in unequal opportunities and conditions, treating them as objects for conquest and protection—the root problem behind the reality of men's relations with women, is the way men see women, is seeing."[37]

However flawed by its psychoanalytic baggage and its tunnel vision in relation to spectatorship, the concept of the gaze has stressed the importance of understanding imagery as structured by the context of male dominance:

the ability to scrutinize is premised on power. This context of male dominance means that not only do men as a gender have the institutional (political and economic) power to control the actual production of culture and cultural images (that is, the heads of all major networks are male, and with few exceptions the same can be said for the film industry and advertising), but they also have the ideological power to control the form and content of the images themselves. Nevertheless, as we will see in later chapters, the reign of this concept has been seriously challenged in recent years.

# 3

# *Positioning Women*
## *Gender, Narrative, Genre*

### Telling Tales

The theory of the male gaze is, as we have seen, strongly linked to a critique of classic realist narrative as inevitably producing and reproducing the diminution of women in the stories of popular culture. Thus, the textual analysis of classic Hollywood cinema became another important area for the new feminist cultural criticism. Narrative theory has a long history, both within film theory and within literary criticism. Here I focus on the specifically *feminist* appropriations of narrative analysis, without reviewing narrative theory in depth. Although narrative has been central to the analysis of culture in general, in more recent years this concern with narrative has been central to film theory and is intimately connected with the rise of structuralism within film studies, as Annette Kuhn indicates: "Work on narrative structures . . . is based on the assumption that any one narrative will share common structures with innumerable others. In other words, the presuppo-