公募論文

The Male Gaze:

What It Is and How It Affects Aesthetic Experience

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What is the male gaze? Most of the readers, if not all, likely can form some idea of what this phrase means and how it is used. This term is often used beyond feminist writers and thinkers, who have the clear objective of unveiling the omission of female presences in history, appearing in everyday conversation. Web articles and blog posts on the male gaze are commonly seen, summarizing the concept.[1] In fact, we tend to act as if there is nothing unclear in this philosophical concept, that we are already capable of using it adequately.

However, the concept of the male gaze is not as simple as it is thought to be. Indeed, it is a certain type of a gaze, but not limited to man. It implies heterosexual masculine stance, but in a way that is structured and normative. It is not just about how people look at specific artworks, but is closely related to the notion of disinterestedness and how it bears the mark of gender. Though there are several existing feminist works that address these issues, I believe there is still a gap between the understanding of the general public and the actual terminology as described by the feminists. For this reason, I think what is required in this era, when gender equality is not just an ideal goal but rather a realistic aim, is to continually present the feminist perspectives to respond to the unconvinced, who believe that traditional theories of aesthetics have nothing to do with gender.

The aim of this paper is to guide readers to an investigation of the term the male gaze from the feminist aesthetics point of view. This might sound redundant, but as I said, it is necessary because despite its familiarity, the concept of the male gaze still requires clarification, especially when we are to consider its relationship with aesthetic experience. In order to address the feminist critiques of traditional aesthetic theories, appropriately defining the term the male gaze is inevitable. I will begin by providing the object of discussion when we speak of the male gaze, followed by the consideration of whether the gaze belong only to men, or if it is even correct to say that the male gaze is limited to men. Finally, I will raise the fundamental issue of the relationship between the male gaze and traditional aesthetic theories and present what it means when we say that the male gaze affects aesthetic experience. In the following, I will deliver these questions with reference to existing feminist arguments, so as to advocate these perspectives as essential tools for modern discussion.

1. Question One: What Is the Problem with the Male Gaze?

When British film theorist Laura Mulvey published her now widely reproduced essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in 1975, it opened up the eyes of its readership through its analysis of the ways in which women are represented in classic Hollywood movies as objects of the male gaze. With this term, Mulvey identified the cinematic tendency to treat female figures as something that existed to satisfy the scopophilic and narcissistic desire of the male viewers.

> The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (Mulvey 1975, 19)

Here, Mulvey refers to the strong effect that is incumbent upon obtaining the position of the bearer of the look. We find pleasure in being the person who looks at something. This is more effective if the object being regarded is represented in such a way that it can never violate our position. We must make ourselves confident that we (viewers) are the ones who are looking, and the ones being watched, you, are merely images. Displaying a woman's body as a tool, and not just merely as a simple tool but an erotic one, reinforces this asymmetric structure. In addition to ensuring the woman's sexual attractiveness, it is also important to actually subordinate a woman by giving her a symbolic character as a passive icon. In this way, the representation of woman in traditional Hollywood movies presupposes a male viewer: the woman's body is displayed as sexy, beautiful, perfect, passive, and available for your possession, whenever and however you like. Viewers are given the right to happily play the voyeur with her body for their delectation while also narcissistically identifying oneself with the heroic, active, and glamourous male protagonist. Thus, Mulvey concludes:

> The actual image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the content and structure of representation, adding a further layer of ideological significance demanded by the patriarchal order in its favourite cinematic form—illusionistic narrative film. (Mulvey 1975, 25)

Mulvey's essay focuses on film theory, citing actual film makers and works such as Hawks's *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939) and *To Have and Have Not* (1944), Sternberg's *Morocco* (1930) and *Dishonored* (1931), and Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), and *Marnie* (1964). I cannot go into sufficient detail in this paper to describe Mulvey's psychoanalysis of these works, but if I were to briefly summarize it, all of these films center on the power of the male gaze, offering visual pleasure through the

gaze of the camera, through the male protagonists of the film, or through a combination of the two.[2]

Interestingly, Mulvey considers film to be unique among art media in terms of confronting the special features of the male gaze. Although she admits that the male gaze is not intrinsic to film, she notes that "the place of the look" and "the possibility of varying it and exposing it" is "what makes cinema quite different in its voyeuristic potential," allowing cinema to build "the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself" (Mulvey 1975, 26).

2. Question Two: Is It All Men's Fault?

Mulvey's analysis has been enormously influential, and it was soon widely applied not only to the study of film but to general discussions of painting, television, photography, and advertising.[3] Today we even find the male gaze theory extending to sociological effects on a woman due to how she is seen by the society, consequently leading to an increased anxiety for her visual image, a need to judge herself through other people's eyes, the issue of lookism, etc.[4] It is tempting to move on to considering these aspects, but my sense is that several points are left implicit in the discussion of the male gaze, especially in Mulvey's characterization of male viewers and their attitude. Hence, before we even begin to discuss the application of the theory itself in our daily lives, I believe that we should investigate the basic questions of the male gaze.

First, we must establish whether the male gaze simply means a gaze of a male. Throughout Mulvey's discussion, she only refers to male viewers and to their perspective, but not female viewers. What she repeatedly presents are the men's role as the bearer of the look and women as icon. For instance, Mulvey indicates: "The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to

neutralise the extradiegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle" (Mulvey 1975, 20).

This leads to another important point, that is, the articulation of the female gaze. Understanding that the concept of the male gaze refers to objectifying woman as a passive erotic representation, created for the satisfaction of the heterosexual male; if, for example, there is a male representation that is erotically submitted for heterosexual female satisfaction, should we then call this the female gaze? Should we similarly criticize its structure? After all, some works of visual art incorporate significant presentations of sexually attractive men.[5]

In the context of these questions, on one side some criticize men for being masculine in the sense of the male gaze—combining their desire to sexually possess woman in visual art, while on the other side are the unconvinced, who object by noting the ability to reverse the vocabulary from male to female and then applying the theory to woman as well. In her consideration of a feminist perspective on female nude, analytic philosopher A.W. Eaton states:

> There is a temptation to understand the concept empirically, as if it described actual audiences and their viewing practices. Conceived this way, 'the male gaze' is taken to designate, for instance, the desirous, open-mouthed stare of the museum patrons (…). But if this is what is meant by the concept, then it privileges heterosexual male viewers while ignoring the many others who were exposed to these pictures from their inception. This leads one to ask, as some frustrated critics have, What of the heterosexual *women* who have been looking at these pictures over the ages? What of the *homosexual* men? What of the *lesbians*? Why should we say that the female nude is any more an object of the *male* gaze than it is of, say, the *female* gaze, or better, the *lesbian* gaze? (Eaton 2012, 292-293)

Eaton claims that these questions are all "misguided" (Eaton 2012, 293). The male gaze, on this telling, does not specifically refer to the actual practice of any actual audience. Indeed, viewers *could* be enjoying the sexual objectification of female figures—and of course the majority of a given audience *could* be men. Traditional Hollywood movies, as Mulvey notes, *could* exhibit features of the male gaze, intentionally or unintentionally, to succeed with the (male) public. However, the reality of male viewers should not be immediately understood as something to be criticized under the theory of the male gaze. As Eaton explains this, "'the male gaze' should be understood as *normative*, referring to the sexually objectifying 'way of seeing'" (Eaton 2012, 293).

What does it mean to understand the male gaze as normative? Eaton indicates that the work embodies the male gaze if it calls upon its audience to 'see' the woman represented as primarily a sex object (cf. Eaton 2012, 293). From here we can say that the male gaze is an institutionalized pattern in works of art that presupposes the sexual objectification of women. The thousands of canonical works that expose woman in similar patterns simply are the examples of asymmetric differences between men and women. We can therefore define the male gaze as a perspective that is provided to the viewers for them to observe the representation and understand it in a particular context. This way of seeing is called "male" simply because it prescribes the ruling social role (and for this same reason it is also considered as a "heterosexual" masculine stance).

Hence the male gaze does not exclusively belong to male viewers. Insofar as this refers to a particular way of seeing where the visual work make demands on the audience, the precise genders of the members of the audience are—I would not say irrelevant but at least—not of the foremost importance. Of course, the way that people actually react to the visual work could vary, depending on which side they are on. You could relate yourself to the male protagonist and enjoy the woman's body, or you could

relate yourself to the woman being depicted and feel uncomfortable with how she is being treated. Whichever position you decide to take, the act of considering such a matter is itself, as I note in the previous paragraph, is merely an analysis based on an empirical viewing attitude and could not adequately support the theory of the male gaze. After all, the problematic part of the male gaze is not precisely how men or women react to the sexually objectified woman but how the visual representation institutionally provides a pattern in which woman are sexually objectified.[6]

Similarly, it is worth noting that in a later essay, Mulvey herself provides a supplement to her analysis, writing that the theory of the male gaze extends to female viewers as well. Female viewers can watch a female actress from a masculine point of view. Mulvey states that this trans-sex identification is a "*habit* that very easily becomes *second nature*" (Mulvey 1981, 35). This later clarification of the "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" should complement the way in which the male gaze can be considered as a viewpoint regardless of the spectator's gender.[7]

3. Question Three: How Does the Male Gaze Affect Aesthetic Experience?

Now, we have a better grasp of what we mean when we say that a visual work—not limited to films but in a broader meaning—embodies the male gaze. Here the male gaze is a structured pattern of a perspective that the work expects us to hold. This way of seeing puts viewers in the position of sexually objectifying women (who are often characterized as passive and available) for the gratification of heterosexual male desire. Accordingly, this applies not only to male viewers but is "internalized by men and women alike" (Eaton 2012, 294).[8]

In her essay, Eaton creates a detailed classification on the actual features of the objectification as part of her analysis of the female nude. She presents nine ways in which an artwork objectifies the unclothed female. These include features such as

constructing an analogy between a person and an object, eroticizing violation, showing extreme emphasis on the sexual body parts, deleting the given object's personality while presenting it as one of many sexually available bodies, and more (cf. Eaton 2012, 287–292). Indeed, her analysis provides us with clear criteria for judging a particular artwork. That is, we can say that a certain work embodies the male gaze if it overly depicts a woman in a passive, sexually attractive way. Should we then conclude that, as the concept of the male gaze implies, our aesthetic experience with respect to these kinds of artworks is somewhat distorted?

In a nutshell, from a feminist aesthetics point of view, we *should* consider the strong relationship between the male gaze and our aesthetic judgments. But how can we say so? Traditional aesthetic theories tend to define aesthetic judgment as something which transcends individuality, by applying philosophical vocabularies that are thought to be objective and universal. In what way do feminists object to this framework? To provide an answer to this question, let us go through the long history of discussion of the notion of disinterestedness and its roots in their eighteenth-century thinking, as well as how feminist philosophers have countered these perspectives.

Generally, many feminists conclude that "women are not well served by the 'disinterestedness' thesis" and that feminists "do have a special mission to expose its somatophobic and misogynist bias" (Hein 1993, 12). Accordingly, Carolyn Korsmeyer writes:

> (…) one of the revisions that feminism implies is the abandonment of the doctrine that a disinterested state of contemplative attention characterizes aesthetic appreciation and appropriate apprehension of art. (Korsmeyer 1993, viii)

What is the problem of disinterestedness? Because Korsmeyer's critique begins with an analysis of the eighteenth-century philosopher Kant, let us approach Kant's

theory of aesthetic judgment to understand, from the feminist perspective, why the notion of disinterestedness could presuppose a hidden gender bias.

In *the Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant identifies four moments in the judgment of an object to be beautiful. This judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment, as it involves a special relationship with the imagination and the understanding (V 203–204). Drawing a comparison between the agreeable and the good, Kant distinguishes the delight that determines the judgment of taste to be independent of all interest, stating that "the judgment of taste is simply *contemplative*, i.e., it is a judgment which is indifferent as to the existence of an object, and only decides how its character stands with the feeling of pleasure and displeasure" (V 209). Furthermore, Kant claims that if delight is separate from any interest, we should assume that the reason for the delight has "no personal conditions" and may also "presuppose in every other person" (V 211). This universality is not acquired from concepts but rather from "the free play" (V 217) of the cognitive powers (imagination and understanding), so the judgment of beauty should be universally communicable, even if it is thoroughly subjective. As summarized by Kneller, in this way, Kant articulates disinterest "as a mental state or attitude that must prevail in order to produce the sort of pleasure (…) that is the ground of a judgment of taste (a judgment about the beautiful)" (Kneller 2014, 73).

What concerned Korsmeyer was the connection of subjective universality for the judgment of the beautiful. Because Kant's account of disinterestedness presupposes general commonality, it sounds as if there is a common ground of human nature. While it should be noted that what Kant meant by subjective universality was nothing more than the special function of imagination and understanding in free play, which is applicable to all human beings in general, when this is combined with the concept of taste, Korsmeyer's point turns out to be relevant. After all, we exhibit good taste if what we judged to be beautiful is generally communicable with others. From Kant's account,

when a certain subject is judged beautiful, we have the right to demand others to judge the same way as we did (cf. V 213). Kant is careful not to say that everyone's taste *has to* be the same. If we judge a subject as beautiful, then it means that we are *demanding* the others the same agreement, whether or not the others agree or disagree. However, even in this case, Korsmeyer warns that presupposing a disinterested pleasure, an enjoyment taken for its own sake, results in privileging a particular taste.

> (…) modern theories of aesthetic judgment are also theories that defend a notion of value that is "universal," that posit a common human nature present in all, and that confirm the grounds for agreement of judgments of "good taste." Such assertions of universality (…) are suspected of reifying a historically specific social philosophy in their descriptions of basic human traits, a social philosophy that includes both androcentric attitudes and views blinkered by presumptions of class, race, and nationality concerning who represents our "common nature." (Korsmeyer 1998, 150)

Although I have to admit that Korsmeyer's analysis of Kant's account of universality could have gone too far (in particular, accurate reading shows that subjective universality simply refers to the free play of the cognitive power), I think her critique must be seriously considered, especially when we examine the issue of the male gaze. Nevertheless, it remains true that a certain type of artwork, one that embodies the male gaze, is highly rated in the western artistic canon. The stance of disinterest allows people to enjoy female nudes, without admitting the influence of the male gaze hence claiming that sexual interest is not at all taken into consideration. People insist that the appropriate way of appreciating an artwork is not to criticize the content ethically or to sexually enjoy the erotic representation of the motif, but to appreciate the form "purely." With the example of *A Roman Slave Market* (c. 1884) by Jean-Léon Gérôme, Korsmeyer states:

> (…) even if we grant that such a distanced appreciation may somewhat suppress discomforting awareness of the scrutiny of the male buyers of female flesh, it would require an act of mind-numbing blindness altogether to extinguish critical consideration of gender and eroticism in this work. That is, disinterestedness may rule out prejudice and interfering moralizing, but it does not and should not make one overlook what is obviously going on in the painting, nor would the painter (or the philosopher himself, for that matter) likely approve of such willful ignorance of what he was probably at pains to depict. (Korsmeyer 2004, 51)

Clearly an artwork of (female) nude that embodies the male gaze presupposes a masculine way of looking—and by this I do not mean that *all* nudes are the same.[9] However, it is amusing to note that no matter how evident the sexual features of a work of art are, so long as we are looking at it from a disinterested point of view, we *should not* look at it in such a way that attracts our interest. Theorists hold that that is exactly what we should be doing. I cannot therefore blame Korsmeyer for suspecting that the disinterested attitude looks to be in the service of a safeguard against desire, namely heterosexual male desire (cf. Korsmeyer 2004, 53).

In sum, the male gale is affecting aesthetic experience in such a way that reinstates the erotic pleasure as something inseparable with aesthetic judgments. No matter how hard we try to standardize the ideas of pleasure and beauty, the act of defining an ideal disinterested stance itself is already absorbing the preference of the ruling social values. Because the male gaze is already deeply entrenched with the authority that lies under the notion of disinterestedness, feminists believe that we can never separate the male gaze with aesthetic experience. Thus for feminists, the male gaze provokes the limitation of the disinterested theory, which was thought to be neutral but never was.

Conclusion

This paper examined discussion of the male gaze to understand this term in a more academic and philosophical context. Because the definition of the male gaze appears to be more complicated than its simple everyday definition to refer to anything related to a man's preference, first we discussed Mulvey's thesis on visual pleasure. Founded on her understanding of psychoanalysis, Mulvey used the term the male gaze to expose the asymmetrical structure of the depiction of women for heterosexual males in traditional Hollywood movies. For Mulvey, the male gaze was a tool that was used to place woman in the position of being looked at.

In the second section, beginning from the basic questions that rise from Mulvey's analysis, we developed the concept of the male gaze with reference to Eaton's analysis of female nudes. Though Mulvey did discuss male viewers when explaining the idea, the male gaze does not mean to claim how men respond to certain artworks. It is important to understand the male gaze as normative, institutional way of seeing, in which artwork exposes itself in such a way to expect viewers to hold a particular stance, that is, to objectify women as passive and sexually available.

Finally in the third section, we considered the relationship with the concept of disinterestedness to determine how the male gaze affects aesthetic experience. Traditional theories of aesthetics tend to refer to a gender-neutral stance featuring universality and generality. Similarly, the concept of disinterest (which is said to be conceptualized by Kant) was thought to be structured from a neutral viewpoint, the ability to look at anything without personal interest. Even if Kant's account of subjective universality does not imply actual social preference for the human traits, unfortunately the thousands of canonical female nude artworks, all depicting woman in related ways, simply make it look *as if* the notion of disinterestedness represents the reigning social

values, involving the male gaze.

I believe that the considerations of the male gaze will ultimately lead to discussion of a far larger issue—whether we should continue to keep with the traditional stance of disinterestedness, or to completely abandon it. Various approaches have been provided by a number of feminists with respect to this question, but it is nonetheless inappropriate to say that only a single direction is left for us. I stand on the side that holds that the reality of how women are treated in traditional disinterested approach should not be ignored. However, in the meantime, if we are to take an approach of interest, how can we find a balance between the ethical/moral aspects and aesthetics? If everything is judged by its moral content, that will indeed be limited, perhaps even more controlled than how the male gaze considered a masculine perspective.

Feminism might not be the only approach to these questions. However, it can be expected to provide impactful investigations, and what we challenged here through the consideration of the concept of the male gaze, should be one of the fundamental examinations.

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note

1 For example, I note here two web articles regarding the male gaze, namely, Loreck, Janice. 2016. "What Does the 'Male Gaze' Mean and What About a Female Gaze," the conversation, January 5, 2016. https://theconversation.com/explainer-what-does-the-male-gaze-mean-and-what-about-a-female-gaze-52486, and Vanbuskirk, Sarah. 2022. "What is the Male Gaze," verywell mind, November 14, 2022. https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-the-male-gaze-5118422.

2　For a quick supplement here, according to Mulvey, Hawks's film "opens with the woman as object of the combined gaze of spectator and all the male protagonists in the film" (Mulvey 1975, 21). Mulvey states that the female character falls in love with a man and loses her subjectivity —all of the attractiveness she had as a show-girl is solely possessed by the male star alone. Regarding Sternberg, Mulvey analyzes that there is "little or no mediation of the look through the eyes of the main male protagonist," but instead his movies have a "direct recipient of the spectator's look" (Mulvey 1975, 23). Finally, compared to Sternberg, Hitchcock focuses more on synchrony with the male protagonist. Hitchcock's "heroes are exemplary of the symbolic order and the law" (Mulvey 1975, 23) and hence his "skillful use of identification processes and liberal use of subjective camera from the point of view of the male protagonist draw the spectators deeply into his position" (Mulvey 1975, 24).

3　It is worth stating here that Freeland gives a concrete summary of how Mulvey's analysis extended to various types of studies, as she notes: "This work ranged from studies of particular filmmakers (Sirk, Hitchcock, Fassbinder) and genres (horror, pornography, melodrama), to criticisms of the basic framework and its problems, such as her apparent inability to account for male masochism, female visual pleasures, or difference of race, class, or sexual preference among women viewers" (Freeland 1998, 354).

4　Cf. Ponterotto 2016.

5　Similar claim can be found in criticisms made by Carroll of Mulvey's utilization of psychoanalytic theory. As he states that it is "hard to see how anyone could come to believe" Mulvey's account, that male characters in cinema are active; females are passive, since there are many examples like "Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger whose star vehicles slow down and whose scenes are blocked and staged precisely to afford spectacles of bulging pectorals and other parts" as well as great female stars like Rosalind Russel and Katharine Hepburn who were "also great doers" in Hollywood movies (Carroll 1998, 378-379).

6　To note here is Eaton's comments regarding Hanson's consideration to the male gaze. Hanson states that the male gaze would be "discomfited" and more "nebulous" if we say that "men's experiences and masculine subjectivity can vary from place to place, time to time, person to person" (Hanson 2005, 506). However, Eaton argues that this is missing the point because the male gaze is not an empirical concept and does not predict viewers' way of looking. Here, I support Eaton to consider the male gaze to be something in that an artwork prescribes to viewers (cf. Eaton 2008, 889).

7　Brand considers that Mulvey's thesis brought about several interesting spin-off notions, such as bell hooks's "oppositional gaze." Similar structure to the trans-sex identification can be found in race differences, where hooks claims that many black viewers were expected to watch these

movies the same way as whites. From Brand's thesis we can say that it is not just gender that is requested in the gaze, but several other layers can be included (cf. hooks 1995; Brand 1998, 8-9).

8　Eaton indicates the use of this term from John Berger's "way of seeing." Berger's analysis on how "men act and women appear" does not only apply for men, but also affects women and her perception. Because woman is continually accompanied by her own image of herself often tilted by the masculine perspective, Berger states that woman are "taught and persuaded to survey herself continually" (Berger 1972, 46). By quoting Berger, Eaton presents the effect of the male gaze to both men and women.

9　As Eaton says, it will be important to make a "conceptual distinction between a representation of sexual objectification and a sexually objectifying representation" (Eaton 2012, 296). The fact that a depicted woman is unclothed does not make the work as a sexually objectifying representation. What makes it problematic is how the work promotes an asymmetrical gender stereotype, such as by presenting woman as a mere sexual object, passive and weak, available for men, etc.

本稿は、二〇二二年度北九州市立大学特別研究推進費「近代美学における美の概念をジェンダーの視点から批判する：認識能力および心の能力によるジェンダー不平等の隠蔽について」による研究成果の一部である。