Laura Mulvey’s classic essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” proposes that films are screened through the ‘male gaze,’ a patriarchal vision that portrays women as the object of sexual desire on multiple psychological levels –from ideals of motherhood to those of castration. Mulvey encapsulates the vision of a feminist theorist in 1975, the year this work was published, but her claim about the ‘male gaze’ in film seems to have held up through time. The ‘male gaze’ in fact can arguably be noticed in all aspects of media in today’s culture, real and imagined. The concept of the woman being used for visual pleasure is perhaps the most enduring reality in all works of art. Jennifer Egan’s Look At Me gives an account of how being looked at in this way affects women. The title alone lends itself to such principles. This ‘male gaze’ extends to social networks as well. In general, women are always conscious of how they are viewed by men. This stems from their exposure to the film and art that saturates their culture. The connection between film, literature, and social networking as they follow Mulvey’s theory of the ‘male gaze’ casts modern Western culture in a shallow light. Her theory focuses on the meaning of idealized women and their contradictions as viewed in film, but this can be applied to multiple media formats. Narcissism is at the root of all of these feminine depictions. Visual pleasure has overtaken human communication, and male centered, visually narcissistic views of beauty are becoming more and more a part of reality as the culture sinks deeper into a technological age as evident in earlier works such as Look At Me and extending to modern social media.

Mulvey’s theory centers around the idea that women are objectified in film in order to fit the needs of men. She claims that the female form is pure spectacle, and that its meaning is
juxtaposed by both sexual fantasy and fear. The women in film, Mulvey claims, are passive subjects while the men both alongside them on the screen and viewing the media are their active counterparts. In watching women in film, men aggressively boost their own ego, making them a working part of the film. Women bring a sense of pleasure, but they also bring a sense of fear. Mulvey says, “Her lack of a penis [implies] a threat of castration and hence unpleasure” (Mulvey). The pleasure comes from objectifying them. The fear can be settled by looking at them and reducing their power to the point of diminishing it. Women, aside from being different in what they lack, are also discriminated by their abilities in reproduction. The female figure is tied to motherhood—woman can only bear children. She cannot create or stand alone without a penis, so that her entire being is there to fulfill men’s needs and comfort their fears. This masculine society holds women down and does not allow any space for women to transcend the low ranks for which they are born into. According to Mulvey,

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning (Mulvey).

This passage illustrates the delicate situation of women in such a society, and explains how the ‘male gaze’ controls women in order to fulfill masculine fantasies, by “imposing” on them in order to keep them “tied to their place.” Women are reduced in the culture as “signifier for the male other,” which places them below men in rank, and hints that they have no purpose other than being exhibitions to be marveled at by their male counterparts. Although childbearing is creation in a sense, Mulvey’s argument centers around the idea that women are bearers, not
creators. It is in their lack of a penis and in their deficiency as creators in which men develop their fears and fantasies.

Another aspect of Mulvey’s theory is ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’, which ties into Look At Me as is evident in the title. She references Sigmund Freud when she claims that one of the pleasures of cinema is in looking. There is a sense of voyeurism in watching others, and this can be achieved in film. Just as there is satisfaction in looking, Mulvey says, “in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at” (Mulvey). The ‘male gaze’ is controlling in a way that it seeks pleasure and reassurance. Its subjects, however, also get a sense of gratification under this gaze. Women constantly play this role because they must in a patriarchal society, but they are so accustomed to this, it is arguable whether they notice – and if they do, whether they enjoy it. In this, Mulvey expands by claiming, “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). The carnality of this implies that the only meaning women have in film is the indulgence of male fantasy. Since they are seen scrutinized by ‘male gaze’ at all times, they have no other purpose. Mulvey says that film focuses on the marvel of ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ because aside from highlighting this aspect of a woman, it “builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself” (Mulvey). Therefore, the pleasure produced by the ‘male gaze’ extends beyond the image of the woman herself into the appreciation for how she is displayed and the meaning men are supposed to draw from her. Women in general can hold this mindset, as the ‘male gaze’ is present in other forms of media besides that of cinema.

Mulvey’s argument encapsulates the idea of how women are viewed, but to give meaning to this, it is necessary to consider the impact this has on women. The novel, Look At Me by
Jennifer Egan emphasizes the idea Mulvey puts forth about ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ in the form of model Charlotte Swenson. Charlotte’s life is a dystopia full of failure and dissatisfaction as she never achieved the stardom she dreamed of. As a model, her career goal is to be seen by as many people as possible. From her reminiscence of the past, it is evident that her obsession with her own ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ began early in life. Egan’s novel tells the story of how her existence is centered around other people’s opinions of her, especially men. Charlotte struggles with her memory throughout the novel, but clearly remembers how her own obsession with the ‘male gaze’ began:

As a teenager, I first became aware of people’s eyes catching on me as I walked down Michigan Avenue with my mother and Grace during shopping trips to Chicago. They glanced, then looked—each time, I felt a prick of sensation within me. I knew how transistors worked; my father had shown me a picture of the very first one, at Bell Labs, a crusty, inauspicious-looking rock that had performed the revolutionary feat of transmitting and amplifying electrical current. The jabs of interest I provoked in strangers struck me as an unharnessed energy source; somehow, I would convert them into power. (131)

As Charlotte recounts this moment in the past where she realized the immense pleasure she received from people’s stares, via a “prick of sensation”, she ultimately decides to live under the spotlight of the ‘male gaze.’ She relates how eyes “catch” on her, as if she were a magnet or the eyes were flies on sticky paper. In her own physiology, she finds power. She compares herself to a transistor in that it “performed the revolutionary feat” of channeling electricity. She describes how the “jabs” of attention she received are “unharnessed energy” that she could take and transform into power. The “gaze” as she describes it she can convert to something else;
something she feeds off of. She is eventually able to get this sensation from online social media as well. The way in which this passage is described relates how Charlotte’s entire perspective of herself extends from the opinions of others. In this she does not have meaning alone, but only when there are others to view her. This relates to Mulvey’s claim about ‘look-at-me-ness’ because Charlotte is so passive a spectator in her own life. She only cares about what other people see in her; she does not have a concept of herself as an individual. This passiveness, however, is disrupted after Charlotte’s accident disfigured her face, but as a result of this her obsession with people’s eyes intensifies.

Charlotte’s character lives to be seen, as her career and life center around how she looks to other people. Charlotte displays this obsession with other’s perception of her through her first-person accounts in the novel. After her accident and reconstructive surgery, the audience never quite knows how she looks. During a one-night-stand she asks her acquaintance, Paul Shepherd, “How do I look? […] Look at me, if you were going to describe me, what would you say?” (Egan 42) Her eagerness to know his answer reveals how concerned she is by what other people see when they look at her. When her sister wants to bring her nieces to see her, Charlotte refuses, saying, “To them, I was Glamorous Aunt Charlotte, the fashion model […] I embodied a mythical ascension,” but now, “I am ashamed to be seen” (Egan 11). She is somewhat of a sympathetic character because she seems to go from one extreme to the other (at least in her mental perception), from a “mythical” being to a woman who’s “ashamed to be seen”. The ‘male gaze’ for Charlotte is so much a part of her identity that regardless of who is looking at her, she needs some reassurance about her physicality in order to keep her spirits lifted. This becomes even more difficult after the accident, but at the same time it becomes even more of a necessity for her.
The accident that distorted Charlotte’s features and transformed her beloved face creates more opportunity for Charlotte to fixate on her own to-be-looked-at-ness. This obsession mainly exists because of her career as a model, but is revealed to have been present throughout her life. As a child, she says, she found pleasure in thinking her life was a movie “projected onto a giant screen before an audience who watched, rapt. […] Gradually, mysteriously, that fantasy evolved into a vocation” (Egan 131). Her memories of being a child sit-com star further prove her to-be-looked-at-ness as Mulvey describes because it has existed within her for so much of her life that her identity as a self is tied into being viewed by others. Her profession was, in this sense, a living out of her own fantasies. The accident so jars her, then, because she feels that she will lose her entire identity if she loses the camera. Mary Ann Doane, author of “Women’s Stake: Filming the Female Body” claims that women, in posing for a camera, are deprived of their naturalism. In this sense, they lose some part of themselves to the camera, which is the superimposed ‘male gaze.’ She says there are “strategies of demystification” and these “strip the body of its meanings.” Doane asks, “What is left after the stripping, the uncoding, the deconstruction? For an uncoded body is clearly an impossibility” (Doane). From Doane’s interpretation, Charlotte has nothing left of herself after the accident. She had so relied on her face, or rather on other people looking at her face, that without this she was nothing. Charlotte’s sense of to-be-looked-at-ness was more than a talent, a calling—it was her identity. This camera that “strips the body of its meanings”, according to Doane, was taken from Charlotte after the accident, and during the time when she could not find a modeling job, she found that she was not real to herself in the absence of it.

To-be-looked-at-ness is more than a pleasure for Charlotte, as Mulvey claims it is for most women. For Charlotte, it is her identity. Upon being recruited as an “Extraordinary” on
Personalspace.com, Charlotte seemingly gains her identity back. Because Charlotte Swenson’s everyday life is broadcast, it is like a film in a sense, as there are cameras that follow her constantly. Unlike film, however, she is not an actress, even though she claims to live a life of lies. Her ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ exists in her whole person. Charlotte Swanson in *Look at Me* embodies the stereotypical actress that Laura Mulvey depicts in her description of the ‘male gaze’. The spectacle that is Charlotte Swanson highlights the same point that Mulvey makes when she claims,

> At the same time the cinema has distinguished itself in the production of ego ideals as expressed in particular in the star system, the stars centering both screen presence and screen story as they act out a complex process of likeness and difference (the glamorous impersonates the ordinary).” (Mulvey)

With the rise of reality television, there seems to be more and more of a pull toward looking at ordinary people performing ordinary tasks. Although Charlotte was deemed an ‘Extraordinary’, her life was originally ordinary in a sense. PersonalSpace.com was created for an audience who wanted to watch the glamorous people during their everyday lives. Even if Charlotte did not begin the series very glamorous, by the end she had the celebrity status she desired, but her ego could not handle who she had become. She becomes a sort of actress with no sense of real identity, which causes her to leave it all behind in the end.

*Look at Me* narrates Charlotte Swenson as a character constantly choosing to be under the ‘male gaze.’ It was published in 2001, and written when the internet was in its beginning stages. With the recent and current shift in media toward a more simple way of getting messages, this novel shows that this “gaze” (embodied by desire and fear) is embedded not only in film, but in other media formats as well. At the time, online social networking was not much more than one-
on-one chat, but it seems to somewhat prophesy what happens in the decade after the novel was published. The way people communicate and view media are much different now than they were in 1975 when Mulvey compared the ‘male gaze’ strictly to cinema. With technological advancements, visual pleasure can be fulfilled in many other ways besides simply film. Because of this, the ‘male gaze’ is as prominent in other media formats, specifically on the internet, as it is in the cinema of the 70’s.

Like PersonalSpace.com in *Look at Me*, other social networking avenues have exploited the ‘male gaze’. Facebook in and of itself is a manifestation of the ‘male gaze’ in society. The site has more than 800 million users and is one of the most visited websites ever. Founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, created Facebook.com from Facemash.com, a Harvard University site placing two photographs of girls next to one another and asking the user to identify which one is more attractive. The film, *The Social Network*, depicts this portion of the account, in which Zuckerberg is drinking with friends and decides to “rank girls” as a way of taking his mind off of his own recent breakup. This triggers a chain of events leading to the creation of Facebook.com, the world’s leading social networking site. Mulvey says, “There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure” (Mulvey). The Facemash.com website, later to become Facebook, encapsulates this. Facebook itself is becoming an icon in society, since it is so easily accessible. Unlike in 2001, now people can access their accounts from their computers and from their cell phones. Its rise in popularity compares to that described in *Look at Me*, though most of the users would be deemed ‘Ordinaries’ in this terminology. Facebook users upload photographs and post status updates in a way that promotes a sense of look-at-me-ness, but Facebook has very different implications than the afore-created fictional Personalspace.
Facebook gives the users the freedom to put forth the person they choose, instead of relying on true-to-life accounts, which differs somewhat from Charlotte’s experience on Personalspace.com, and also lends itself to the concept of narcissism. With Facebook, the user can gain self-esteem in to-be-looked-at-ness because they are in control – they are active participants and co-conspirators in this “gaze,” which is strikingly similar to the “male gaze” present throughout media’s history. As Soraya Mehdizadeh writes in an article, *Self-Presentation 2.0: Narcissism And Self-Esteem On Facebook*, all users of Facebook have the control over what people see, which affects their own self-worth. Mehdisadeh cites evidence of a study of Facebook and self-esteem, concluding, “In particular, users can select attractive photographs and write self-descriptions that are self-promoting in an effort to project an enhanced sense of self. Furthermore, Facebook users can receive public feedback on profile features from other users, which can act as a positive regulator of narcissistic esteem.” (Mehdisadeh). The difference between the Facebook of today’s society and Personalspace.com, which marked the beginning and end of Charlotte’s career as an “Extraordinary” celebrity in a sense, is the control factor. The opportunity to edit what is being seen through the “gaze” adds a control that lends itself to narcissism. Self-esteem can be enhanced by this control, and it is in having control over one’s profile that can, as Mehdisadeh claims, “project[s] an enhanced sense of self,” which fosters narcissism because shared information can be the cream of the crop, showing only details the user wants.

The social networks of the twenty-first century particularly that of Facebook, is one that also seems to follow the philosophy of the ‘male gaze.’ However, the ‘male gaze’ is juxtaposed with a sense of freedom and control, which establishes a revolution from a feminist standpoint because women now have a sense of power over the ‘male gaze.’ It is clear that women are
subjected to the ‘male gaze,’ but unlike past media, like film and television of the twentieth century, Facebook and other social networking sites make women wholly responsible for how others see them. This differs from Mulvey’s theory. They create their own profiles, upload their own pictures, and post their own status updates. Women have embraced the “male gaze” as they never have before. Social networking has provided the opportunity for women to take part in the “gaze” that was previously denied to them. They can now take ownership in a sense, and place their ‘best faces’ forward, lending to more narcissism but also higher self-esteem. They are co-conspirators in a sense because they are aware of the “male gaze,” but they can manipulate the information they put forth. Women can show what they want to, therefore they can have some power over how they are viewed in this “male gaze”. Since they have so much control over this, it puts into question whether this can exist in a patriarchal society, or whether this new-found freedom in social networking puts men and women on more equal grounds. Even though the “male gaze” exists as it always has in media, women are contributors instead of simply objects. They benefit from being under the “gaze” because this can improve their own self-esteem.

Charlotte’s situation with PersonalSpace.com was different than this. She remained passive in her own to-be-looked-at-ness throughout the novel, until she finds that celebrity status gives her too much assurance, and needs to escape this objectifying life of always being watched. Jennifer Egan, in an interview with Charlie Reilly, explains some aspects of Charlotte’s character, and from an author’s standpoint believes that Charlotte redeems herself at the end, when she disappears from the ‘gaze.’ Egan expresses this:

When I began Look at Me, I found myself wondering what could be left of someone who had been looked at that much, and I presumed it would be a book about the way that strange culture of image and appearance destroys identity
[...] I found that identity is a good deal stronger, that a human being’s private life, and personality, can never be simply eliminated [...] I came to realize that the images of these models are not real people—they're the shells of real people. But the people themselves are still at large somewhere; they haven't been erased.

(Reilly)

For Egan, the end of Look At Me shows that Charlotte was not in the end simply a shadow self; she had emerged from “that strange culture of image” with some of her identity left. Models, as Egan claims, are “shells of real people,” which emphasizes that their inner selves are so wrapped up in the camera that this ‘male gaze’ is a part of their identity in human form. Charlotte, holding such a passive role in her own life, proves that the ‘male gaze’ brings women down. Oppositely, Facebook does not have the negative connotation that Personalspace.com has in Look At Me because women are in control of their own profiles, giving them freedom to make decisions that Charlotte did not have.

The ‘male gaze’ as Mulvey theorizes does have a substantial effect on women. This ‘gaze’ is present in the camera itself. For women, the camera can symbolize their own identity, and for men it can be a way of controlling them. Mulvey’s theory centers around film in 1975, but Charlotte in Look At Me demonstrates the same phenomena through her modeling career and through Personalspace.com. Charlotte’s perception of herself is classic to-be-looked-at-ness, and this resounds as the main theme of the novel. Look At Me literally sees into the mind of a victim of the “male gaze”. She is a victim because she has no control over how she is portrayed by others. The “male gaze” has endured throughout the span of media’s existence, but it seems to be transforming into something more positive for women. Look At Me also foreshadows online social media, but the most expansive site, Facebook, seems to give a new definition to the “male
gaze”. To-be-looked-at-ness in general has only increased with more developed forms of social interaction, but it is proving to have benefits for both men and women in this new social networking world. Mulvey’s bleakness about the subject in terms of women’s identity in film can be seen elsewhere, but with Facebook, at least there is some sense of control for women, and they may not be forced by this patriarchal society to live as passive counter-parts forever.

Sources


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