

Lacan: Under The Misconception of The Gaze

ISSUES & CONTEXT ESSAY

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Lacan's theory of *The Gaze* has been a central topic of discourse in feminist criticism, particularly during the 1970s in the wake of the Women's Liberation movement that hailed the first wave of modern feminism as it is perceived today. Careful study of this period's feminist critique will reveal a gross misapprehension of Lacan's *Gaze Theory* that is likely to have been instigated by Laura Mulvey's influential essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" of 1975. In her essay, Mulvey argued that Lacan's *Gaze Theory* is key to explaining how women have been constantly portrayed as objects of visual pleasure for the male spectator in film. In this essay, I will explore some of the misconstructions of Lacan's *Gaze* and its repercussions in feminist artwork in addition, to presenting the rectified reading of this theory which emerged in the 1990s and demonstrate how Lacan's *Gaze* remains formative in psychoanalytical approaches to art and cultural production.

Early readings of the *gaze*, particularly in original Lacanian film theory defined it as a visual apparatus that extends the physical function of the eyes allowing us to see the world around. Thus it does not serve another purpose beyond an extension tool.¹ However, according to Lacan, the *gaze* is a visual perception phenomenon that humans engage in at both the active conscious level and the subliminal². Therefore, the gaze functions beyond the physical extension of the visual field by engaging the individual in an intensive cognitive process that crosses different realms of existence.

Within this internal perceptive process, the scopical drive is manifested, whereby Lacan had argued that the element of desire – precipitated by the lack concept which was instigated by the fragmented body form in early life – infiltrates the individual's psyche. As he noted in his famous essay, "imminent in the geometrical dimension – a partial dimension in the field of the gaze – something symbolic of the function of the lack, of the appearance of the phallic ghost".³

A logical deduction materialises – once a cognitive internalisation takes place within an individual subject – the subject's own and personal psychological drives will be manifested in the act of gazing. Lacan had centred the psychological drive on the element of desire and "the appearance of the

¹ Emanuelle Wessels, 'Occasioning the Real: Lacan, Deleuze, and Cinematic Structuring of Sense' in Jan Jagodzinski, *Psychoanalyzing Cinema: A Productive Encounter with Lacan, Deleuze, and Žižek* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2012) pp. 154. Wessels' survey of early Lacanian film and apparatus theorists demonstrates that they championed the idea that the camera served as a prosthetic extension to the sight organ; the eyes, and thus limited the definition of the *gaze* to its physical function. In other words, the eyes/camera attend only to the physical attributes of form within an optical field.

² In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, Norton Paperback, USA 1981; reissued 1998, pp.73, Lacan defined the gaze "our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it – that is what we call the gaze" in relation to his theory of the three registers of human existence. He argued that in the gaze "a strange contingency" occurs where the individual operates in both the Symbolic and Real registers simultaneously, where "the drive is manifested at the level of the scopical field". Early readings of Lacan have often placed the gaze within the Imaginary Register in which the ego is formed and identification occurs.

³ Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I (1936) and 'Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a* (1964)' in Chris Kul-Want, *Philosophers on Art from Kant to the Postmodernists: A Critical Reader*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 2010) pp. 149 - 167

phallic ghost”, which is where I believe one of the principle misconceptions took place. Feminist critics understood the desire to be the sexual male desire which can be partially fulfilled through visual pleasure made possible by the voyeuristic factor available in the *gaze*. However, the terminology adopted by Lacan was not literal in sense, since the subject in the *gaze* may actually be female and thus the lack and castration anxiety complex cannot literally apply. Nonetheless, female artists were keen to embrace this literalism in meaning to create highly critical and provocative pieces that challenge gender roles in a patriarchal society. One of the finest examples cited by Hal Foster is Lynda Benglis photograph *Untitled* of 1974



Fig. 1 Lynda Benglis, *Untitled*, 1974
Colour Photograph, 25cm x 26.5cm

(see Fig. 1). Foster noted:

“With the rise of feminism in the sixties and seventies ... psychoanalysis figured as both weapon – because it offered profound insights into the relation between sexuality and subjectivity – and target – because it tended to associate women not only with passivity but also with lack. In this photograph ... American artist Lynda Benglis ... seized the “phallus” in a way that both literalized its association with plenitude and power and parodied it”⁴

The psychological drive of desire in Lacan’s theory is ultimately a demand for love.⁵ This desire is thought to be activated by the initial separation of mother and child, causing the ‘lack’ and ultimately the castration anxiety complex.⁶ Todd McGowan explains this further when he writes, “Desire is motivated by the mysterious object that the subject posits in the Other – the objet petit a ... what (the subject) is looking for is not, as one says, the phallus – but precisely its absence”.⁷ Evidently this desire can never be satisfied since this incessant demand for love will never be completely fulfilled for either man, woman or child. Moreover, the gaze cannot be deemed as property of man only or confined to a particular gender, race, ethnic or age group.

⁴ Hal Foster. ‘Psychoanalysis in Modernism and as Method’ in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and David Joselit, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, (Thames & Hudson, London, 2012) pp. 19

⁵ Dairan Leader and Judy Groves. *Introducing Lacan: A Graphic Guide*, (Icon Books Ltd. London, 2010) pp. 81. Leader & Groves demonstrate how the demand for love can never be satisfied when they write, “If someone asks you if you love them and you say yes, that will not stop them from asking you again and again and again”.

⁶ Steven Z. Levine, *Lacan Reformed*, (I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, London, 2008). Levine notes that “within the circuit of the scopopic drive the lost remnant of my primordial separation from the mother is the gaze”. pp. 75.

⁷ Todd McGowan. ‘Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes’, *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 42, No.3 (Spring 2003) pp.27 - 47

Lacan has also argued that the *gaze* “is a property of the object rather than the subject”⁸. The ownership of the *gaze* is of extreme significance as it appropriately redistributes the power balance between the see’er and the seen. The seen, otherwise can be identified as the object, is fully aware of the see’er or the subject looking at it. As Lacan explains, “the pre-existence of a gaze – I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides ... we are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world”.⁹ Lacan had stressed on the “pre-existence of the overall field of visibility to the agency of any individual eye looking at the world”.¹⁰ Thus, the see’er subject is also aware that it is a seen object at all times. Unfortunately, this crucial point was often overlooked in early feminist readings.

Feminist critics like Laura Mulvey focused on the passive nature of ‘being seen’, as she asserted in her famous essay,

“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 form 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”¹¹

In undermining the see’er’s awareness of being seen, Mulvey disparaged the active role the seen/object plays in the moment of *gaze*. This passive exhibitionist nature of the female object was entertained by numerous female artists, who like Mulvey and other feminist theorists appear to have partially disregarded the active role the object played in the *gaze*. Perhaps one of the most powerful artworks that demonstrated the dominance and supremacy held by a subject in the gaze was Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* performance of 1964. In this act, Ono’s clothes were cut-off her body piece by piece with a pair of scissors by the audience whilst she sat in complete silence. The passive nature of her objectification was further reinforced with her blank expressionless face which she maintained for the greater part of the performance. In a sense, *Cut Piece* maybe read as a literal illustration of the sexual objectification of women under the male desiring *gaze* and the helpless passivity of the female object.

However, as Lacan notes, “At the very level of phenomenal experience of contemplation, this all seeing aspect is to be found in the satisfaction of a woman who knows that she is being looked at,

⁸ David Macey. ‘Gaze’ in *Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Penguin Books, UK, 2001) pp.155. The subject is defined as the active individual engaged in the act of seeing within the *gaze*, whilst the object is defined as the passive individual (or any other form) that is being seen or looked at in the same *gaze*.

⁹ Jacques Lacan. *Four Fundamental Concepts* 1998. 72

¹⁰ Steven Z. Levine, *Lacan Reformed*, pp. 69

¹¹ Laura Mulvey. ‘Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema’ in *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975) pp. 6-18



Fig. 2 René Magritte, *Les Liasons Dangereuses*, 1935
Oil on Canvas,

on condition that one does not show her that one knows that she knows".¹² This act of perception – of being perceived and looked at – from the standpoint of the object demonstrates an active participating role in the undertaking of the *gaze*. According to Kaja Silverman, "the subject might be said to assume responsibility for "operating" the gaze by "seeing" itself being seen, even when no pair of eyes are trained on it – by taking not so much the gaze as its effects within the self".¹³

In effect, the object is actually empowered in the *gaze* act and from a feminist perspective may no longer be seen as a helpless sexual object. A literal illustration of this view is best exemplified in René Magritte's *Dangerous Liasons* of 1935 (see Fig. 2)

where "the subject is thus lured into the image of the object by the mechanism illustrated by the anamorphosis".¹⁴ In Magritte's painting, the mirror held by the woman is intended to act as a shield; covering up her naked body and deflect her image, however, what actually happens is that the mirror captures the entirety of the woman's body revealing more than what it is supposed to conceal. Interestingly, the woman's closed eyes and downward tilt of the head hint to the idea that she is all knowing of the mirror's true use but feigns unawareness.¹⁵ The self-reflexive nature of the *gaze* whereby the object seen "appears to want us (the subject) to be its ideal viewer" is what drove Lacan to situate the "reflexivity of the scopic drive".¹⁶

Another oversight that led feminists to a misapprehension of the Lacanian *gaze* is his famous idiom, "woman does not exist". Feminist critics were coxswained to challenging existing gender roles and

¹² Jacques Lacan. *Four Fundamental Concepts* 1998. 75. When reading this citation, it is imperative to keep in mind that the woman is operating at the conscious level in the Symbolic realm and hence functions with the adopted alien self that was constructed during the early years of the mirror stage.

¹³ Kaja Silverman. 'Fassbiner and Lacan: A Reconsideration of Gaze, Look and Image' in Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey, *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*, (Wesleyan University Press: Connecticut 1994) pp. 274

¹⁴ David Macey. *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 155

¹⁵ Wessels captured the power essence of the gaze in relation to the subject when she wrote, "Thus, the eye structures the gaze, but in a manner that immobilizes and paralyzes the subject, denies her mastery, and renders him powerless and helpless". In a sense, the viewer/see'er is not the overall dominant master in the act of gaze, but infact, it is the seen/object who invites the subject to lay down his/her gaze.

¹⁶ Steven Z. Levine, *Lacan Reformed*, pp.70. Levine argued that the "libidinal drive of the look is not only to see the object of desire (voyeurism) but also to make oneself seen by the other as the desired object of its gaze (exhibitionism)".

contesting the sexualisation of female subjects in popular cinema and culture. Lacan's postmodernist argument – that explains how identities are non-existent in 'reality' and not based on biological essentialism, but in effect constructed in the Symbolic linguistic structure that we all exist in – is inclusive of both sexes and all gender roles. According to Elizabeth Wright; a postfeminist analyst who reviewed the works of Joan Riviere and Lacan, noted,

"Joan Riviere maintains that womanliness is a cover-up to conform with social construction of femininity, a masquerade where the woman as a category does not exist ... womanliness as a 'feint' or 'cover-up', for 'there is no absolute femininity beneath the veil, only a set of ontologically tenuous codes that normatively induct the female subject into the social practice of "being" woman through mimesis and parroting'".¹⁷

In essence, the popular feminine traits adopted by the female subject, fantasised about by the male viewer and reinforced through an ontological representation of women in popular culture is no more than a constructed signifier of a void, hence, Lacan's maxim, "woman does not exist".

One of the best artists to exemplify the constructed nature of the 'self' and of gender was Claude Cahun whose 1930 profile-shot self-photograph defies conventional expectations of 'woman' (see Fig. 3). In shaving her head, wearing no make-up or any self-adornments, Cahun challenged the 'idea' of womanhood in the 1930s and demonstrated that the 'self' is nothing more than constructed images beheld by the gaze and like the gaze, elusive in nature. As Laurie J. Monahan comments on this photograph, "This portrait aggressively militates against the normative ideals of femininity and more broadly exposes the viewer's expectations of intelligible identity as grounded specifically in gender".¹⁸

Over and above Cahun's self-portrait demonstrates the "power travels and the effects of the gaze upon the subject"¹⁹ where the object masters control and defies the subject's expectation



Fig. 3 Claude Cahun, *Self-Portrait from Bifur*, No. 5, 1930
Edition du Carrefour, Paris

¹⁷ Elizabeth Wright. *Postmodern Encounters: Lacan and Postfeminism*, (Icon Books Ltd. Cambridge, 2000), pp. 33. Wright argues that feminist critics' response (such as Irigaray, Montrelay and Kristeva) to Joan Riviere's question of "if feminist critique denounces every description of the feminine as male cliché, what, then is the feminine 'in itself'? fails to address the issue since they "can be discredited as male clichés". She further elaborates that Slavoj Zizek confirms that the acknowledged feminine virtues are both authentic features of the female sex and values imposed by a patriarchal society.

¹⁸ Laurie J. Monahan. 'Radical Transformations: Claude Cahun and the Masquerade of Womanliness' in Catherine De Zegher *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine* (MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1996), pp. 128

¹⁹ Clifford T. Manlove. 'Visual "Drive" and Cinematic Narrative: Reading Gaze Theory in Lacan, Hitchcock and Mulvey', *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Spring 2007), pp. 83 - 108

(male or female) and gaze. Rather than grant the subject the possibility to gaze in search for the elusive *petit a*, she holds his/her gaze in an act of defiance thereby shocking the subject's Symbolic self with its Real self. As Wessels notes, "Far from being merely an ego-driven process allowing preconstituted subjects to gain mastery over the visual field, the gaze is, conversely, a traumatic and constitutive process that allows for, when fully experienced, the recognition of the virtual at the heart of symbolic identity, and the reconfiguration of identities and subjectivities around it."²⁰

In Conclusion, we must note the elusive nature of the *gaze* and the shifting disposition of psychoanalysis which makes them prone to various interpretations. In a postmodernist era, a psychoanalytical approach to artwork inevitably yields to more questions and widens reading possibilities. The Lacanian *gaze* was used as a 'weapon' by feminist critics and artists to fight for their gender and place in a patriarchal society during the 60s and 70s, however his *gaze* and *ideal ego* theories may also be used today to advocate gender and minority rights in oppressive regimes. These theoretical tools are malleable enough to shape and serve the objectives of its user and I believe if they are utilised by regimes to propagate ominous ideologies that serve their agendas, these theories become the most potent weapon.

²⁰ Emanuelle Wessels. 'Occasioning the Real' in *Psychoanalyzing Cinema*, pp. 155

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