

Male gaze

[Business](#), [Marketing](#)



Assignment: How have women been portrayed through photography?

16/01/2009 How have women been portrayed through photography? The gaze deals with how the audience views the people presented in visual culture, in this case, adverts, magazines and Cinema. The 'male gaze' is the male ability to exercise control over women by representing them in visual means as passive, sexual objects of male desire. The power of men over women has always existed. They are seen as the more powerful and clever species. This control over women has been seen predominately in linguistics senses in past times.

It is clear that there are more derogatory terms for women than there are for men. Men can also wolf whistle or cat-call in order to harass a woman but there is no such response for women. Men also have more linguistic power over women due to their social status in modern society. In more current times men have turned to visual arts to implement their control and power over women. In this essay I hope to demonstrate how women are and have been portrayed in relation to the 'male gaze' and how it is still very prevalent in contemporary modern culture through photography and other mediums, such as, cinema and advertising.

I will be analyzing the photographic work of Cindy Sherman, E. J. Bellocq, advertisement and the written work of Laura Mulvey and John Berger. Traditionally imagined, written and produced by men, advertisements have long depicted women as men want them to be, sexy, obedient, fragile, instead of as they actually are. In this way, the male gaze is very predominant in modern advertising. John Berger put it in *Ways of Seeing*, "Men act and women 'appear'. Men look at women. Women watch

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themselves being looked at. "[i] When women look at themselves in modern advertisements, they are encouraged to view themselves as a man might view them.

Women have very few roles in the world of advertising. Mainly they are portrayed as domestic providers who do not make significant decisions, are dependent on men, and are essentially sex objects. This traditional representation of women is a problem, not because it is wrong to want women to be sexy or striking but rather because their beauty is being defined as a means to male power through strategic admiration. Most adverts on television and in magazines have pretty, sexy women with the idea being that if you buy what they are selling than you will get the girl in the advert, or in a woman's case, be the girl who gets her man.

A good example of this is cigarette advertising; in this case I will be looking at a 1960's ad campaign by Tiparillo. This campaign showed an off screen man offering a variety of women a choice in cigarettes and small text at the bottom of the advert discussing the cigarette but also a crude comment on the women pictured. The women appear to play strong roles, a Lab Technician, Librarian and Violinist, but the ' male gaze' is clear as though they may have strong positions, they are still portrayed as sexual objects.

In the advert Tiparillo M - 1967 we see on first glance is what appears to be a strong, smart lab technician, the glasses help emphasise that she is intelligent. She is photographed from her cleavage upwards, The model dons a gormless expression, though it is stated why she may have this expression on her face in the text accompanying the advert, ' Underneath that pocket of

pencils beats the heart of a digital computer', here we are made aware the woman is actually a robot.

This puts the woman in the position of being passive, being programmed by the man. The way the male character is displayed off screen puts an emphasis on the spectator and how he 'identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his life, his screen surrogate.' [ii] the last sentence in the text is 'which Tiparillo are you going to offer? Or are you just going to stand there and stare at her pencils?' This comment is obviously referring to staring at the woman's chest, the pencils are in line with her breasts.

Cindy Sherman first came to prominence in the late 1970s [iii], when Sherman produced her Untitled Film Stills, which spotlights the complexities of the female persona as seen through the lens of the media. With the photographs she takes of herself, she impersonates various characters and shows us the numerous roles women play in our world. In her pictures she depicts women as housewife, sex symbol, lover, victim, monster and more, and causes us to reflect upon how we perceive women.

The characters Sherman portrays, lighting, clothing and expressions are cliché of what is present in cinema, so much that viewers of her work have told Sherman that they 'remember the movie' that the image is derived from, yet Sherman having no film in mind at all. [iv] Thus showing that her work has a pastiche of past cinematic genres, and how women are portrayed in cinema and photography and how Sherman has manipulated the 'male gaze' around her images so they become ironic and cliché. Laura Mulvey

understands Sherman's Untitled Film Stills as to be rehearsing this structure of the 'male gaze', "The camera looks; it captures the female character in a parody of different voyeurisms. It intrudes into moments in which she is ungraded, sometimes undressed, absorbed into her own world in the privacy of her own environment. Or it witnesses a moment in which her guard drops and she is suddenly startled by the presence, unseen and off-screen watching her." [v] Voyeurism is most apparent in Sherman's work, in Untitled Film Still, #2 the subject is a young woman wrapped in a towel, which is draped from her back, revealing her buttocks if the image was to be taken a second later.

Sherman stands before her bathroom mirror, touching her shoulder and following her own gesture in its reflected image. [vi] The way Sherman has positioned herself, mouth slightly open, a longing gaze, her hand caressing her shoulder, head tilt back, neck extended and in a profile position, the reflection appears to be an extract from an issue of Vogue. A door is visible in the left of the image; this puts the viewer outside the room, peering in at a moment where the subject's guard is down, a moment of privacy and emotion.

In 1981 Sherman produced a series of images called Centrefolds; here Sherman photographed herself in a series of narratives which have a 'soft-core pastiche' to her Untitled Film Stills and associate her horizontal framing to that of the format of 'cinemascope'. In this series Mulvey focuses on the characters and the 'masquerade of femininity's interior', "The young women that Sherman impersonates may be daydreaming about a future

romance, or they may be mourning a lost one. They may be waiting, in enforced passivity, for a letter or a telephone call. Their eyes gaze into the distance.

They are not aware of their clothes, which are sometimes carelessly rumpled, so that, safe alone with their thoughts, their bodies are, slightly revealed to the viewer. "[vii] Untitled #96 shows Sherman sprawled out on a tiled floor, almost merging in with her orange ensemble, a warm tone on her skin also matching her outfit. Sherman is gazing dreamily out of frame whilst clutching (what could be) a personal's ad torn from a newspaper. Krauss states that, " like Jackson Pollock, Sherman disturbs this verticality by using a downward camera angle in her photographs.

Yes, the angle makes one aware of the horizontal, but it also emphasizes the vertical (power/domination) position of the viewer in relation to the apparent weakness of the horizontally inclined woman (Sherman). " [viii] Sherman's Centrefold photographs have a ' to-be-looked-at-ness' of femininity. Unlike with Sherman's Untitled Film Stills which have a fake narrative, the subjects would always be looking off of frame, so that the camera doesn't draw any unwanted attention, giving it that film aesthetic.

Where Sherman's 1981 Centrefolds do the opposite, they ' announce themselves as photographs', and in a pin-up, the model's eroticism, and her pose, are directed towards the camera, and ultimately towards the spectator. [ix] Sherman only thought of the relation of the ' male gaze' in her 1981 work ' Centrefold's, " The horizon/ centrefold type pictures I did, were meant to resemble in format a centrefold, but in content I wanted a man

opening the magazine to suddenly look at it in expectation of something lascivious and then feel like the violator they would be. Looking at these women perhaps as a victim...

I didn't think of them of victims at the time. I am trying to make someone feel bad for having this sort of certain expectation, and so that is the only real time I've consciously thought of the male gaze. "[x] Sherman wants the viewer, in this case the male spectator, to feel wrong for applying the gaze, and stereotyping women into a passive, victim, love sick women which is often depicted in both cinema and photography. When opening the magazine Sherman wants to feel like a violator, having expected sexually orientated image, by almost walking in on someone in a private moment.

In one of Sherman's more recent works, Untitled # 276 we see her represent Cinderella, a famous female from western fairy tale. Sherman portrays this childhood character her in a way that is radically different from any other representation and is polar opposite to that of say Disney. The only similarity between Disney's Cinderella and Sherman as Cinderella is their blond hair. Disney's portrayal of Cinderella is innocent, sweet, modestly dressed in a beautiful gown and jewels with a perfectly proportioned body stereotypical for an attractive female, waiting for her prince to come and take her away from her problems.

However, Sherman is made up to look like a what's could be resembled as 'white trash', her dress is see through and her breasts (presumably fake) are visible. Her legs are spread inviting the spectator and there is large black area between her legs, which could possibly be (knowing Sherman) pubic

hair. She looks anything but innocent as she assumes a confident, sexually charged attitude in a take me or leave me kind of posture. She looks like she could give a damn if her prince comes and perhaps she wouldn't even acknowledge him if he did arrive.

Ironically, she is holding a white lily, the traditional 'symbol of purity' White lilies represent the purity of the Virgin Mary. The Angel Gabriel was often painted presenting Mary with a white lily when he announced to her that she would give birth to the Son of God. [xi] Here Sherman has depicted a more realistic male depiction of what Cinderella would look like. I think that this reaction is typical; a symbol of the sexism present in society, traditional beauty is good, a whore, unconventional beauty, a promiscuous woman and nudity is bad.

E. J. Belloq's images of prostitutes taken the town of Storyville, New Orleans in the early 1900's 'encapsulate' the 'male gaze'. [xii] All the photographs are portraits of individual women. Some are nude, some dressed respectably, and others posed as if acting a mysterious narrative. Even though Belloq's images contain nudity, this is not where the 'male gaze' is prevalent, it's the fact that his subjects are prostitutes and their sole function is to 'advertise what the body has to offer'.

The way Belloq has photographed his subject is in a documentary style, unlike where Sherman has taken a film narrative to her images, Belloq photographed his subject full frame and frontal. Untitled 01 is of young women elegantly laid out on a chaise-lounge. Apart from the Zorro like mask she is only wearing black stockings and what appears to be a wedding ring.

This image is a prime example of the 'male gaze'. The way she is laid out, naked, facing the camera so that she is displaying her 'goods' to her client.

Her face is covered by a mask, it can be seen as to protect her identity, but also it can be related to women as a sexual object. This image has a 'come-hither quality', a relaxed pose and an inviting smile, with just enough room for the client/ spectator to sit on the chaise-lounge. The first thing that strikes the viewer in Untitled 02, is that the face of the prostitute has been 'scratched out'. Susan Sontag stated that 'these pictures [of blacked out faces] are actually painful to look at, at least for the viewer.

But then I am and women... '[xiii] Even from a male's point of view I do find these images subjective to women as without a face there is no identity, purely and object of sexual desire. The scratched out faces can be seen as violent towards women. The woman in the picture seems to have a back slightly arched and hand behind her head. She could be tying her hair or extenuating her breasts for the spectator, in this case the client. The woman appears to be quite petite, possibly young, maybe that's the reason why the face has been scratched away?

We can conclude that the 'male gaze' has been used throughout Photography, from both male (Belloq) and female (Sherman) perspective, but both have used the 'male gaze' in different ways. Belloq's has used it unconsciously through his documentary/portraiture images, which depicts women as more of a sexual object and something to be desired. Where Sherman's has used it consciously through her well composed narrative images, taking the stereotypical ideals of women and photographed them in

a cliché style which is all but apparent in past and present cinema.

----- [i]. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC, 1974) [ii]. Laura Mulvey, *A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman*, *New Left review*, vol. 188 July/August 1991 pp. 8 [iii]. <http://www.artfacts.net/index.php/pageType/exhibitionInfo/exhibition/13349/lang/1> [Accessed 28 December 2008] [iv]. Listbet Nilson – Q & A: Cindy Sherman, American photographer, September 1983 p. 77 [v]. Laura Mulvey, *A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman*, *New Left review*, vol. 88 July/August 1991 pp. 5 [vi]. *Cindy Sherman 1975 – 1993* – Rosalind Kraus, Rizzoli International Publications, 1993 pp. 56 [vii]. Laura Mulvey, *A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman*, *New Left review*, vol. 188 July/August 1991 pp. 5 [viii]. *THE SHERMAN PHENOMENA: The Image of Theory or a Foreclosure of Dialectical Reasoning* - <http://www.brickhaus.com/amoore/magazine/Sherman.html> [Accessed 29 December 2008] [ix]. Laura Mulvey, *A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman*, *New Left review*, vol. 88 July/August 1991 pp. 6 [x]. *Ovation TV | Cindy Sherman, Nobody's Here But Me* - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xsow0QaKJAM> [Accessed 28 December 2008] [xi]. <http://painting.about.com/cs/inspiration/a/symbolsflowers.htm> [Accessed 04 January 2009] [xii]. Graham Clarke, *The Body in Photography*, chapter 7 of *The Photograph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 123-144 [xiii]. *Bellocq: Photographs from Storyville, the Red-Light District of New Orleans* susan sontag - http://www.masters-of-photography.com/B/bellocq/bellocq_articles2.html [

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