

Gaze

ANNEKE SMELIK

Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands

The notion of the gaze can be related back to Simone de Beauvoir's feminist understanding of women's oppression within the dialectics of gender relations (Beauvoir 2009). Women, the oppressed ("second") sex, internalize the objectifying gaze of men upon them and do not have the power to own or return the gaze. In the division of the sexes the man is the Subject while the woman remains the Other.

Today, the notion of the gaze is widely used in visual culture. Berger (1972) proposed that in Western culture, from painting to advertising, men look and women are looked at. The theoretical explanation of the male gaze as involving complex mechanisms of voyeurism and narcissism was specifically developed in film studies.

Voyeurism, the desiring look at someone else, is explained by the Freudian concept of *scopophilia*: the desire to look as the foundation of human sexuality. Film theorists argue that the medium of film is based on *scopophilia*: in the darkness of the cinema, the viewer is a voyeur who can look at the screen without limits or fear of being punished for his or her desire.

Mulvey (1989/1974) advanced the idea that active and passive aspects of the desiring look are distributed among the sexes in cinema. The male character is powerful as he actively commands the narrative and the visual point of view. In classical Hollywood films the male character looks at a woman while the camera films what he sees. Because the camera films along with the male character, the viewer is invited, or rather forced, to adopt a

male position. "The male gaze" is a cinematic structure combining a threefold look: camera, male character, and viewer. To enhance the visual pleasure, the woman's body is "cut up" into close-ups through framing and editing. The male gaze works in cinema as a form of voyeurism objectifying the woman's body and turning it into a passive spectacle; in Mulvey's famous words, into "to-be-looked-at-ness."

Narcissism, the desiring look at oneself, is related to Lacan's theory of the mirror phase. The film functions as a mirror in which the viewer recognizes his or her ideal "I" through a secondary identification with the hero, in addition to the primary identification with the cinematic apparatus of camera and projection. The mirror phase is a psychoanalytic concept that explains how a child builds his or her first sense of a conscious self, at a young age before the entry into language. Lacan proposes that the parent holds the child up before a mirror, teaching the child to recognize itself by distinguishing its self from the (m)other.

The mirror image is an imaginary idealization, because the child projects an ideal image of itself onto the mirror. This ideal self-image leads the child to a first awareness of the ego. The recognition of the self in the mirror image is simultaneously a "mis"-recognition (*méconnaissance*), because the child identifies with the image of itself as an other, that is to say, as a better self than he or she will hope to be in the future.

In cinema, the identification with the larger-than-life figures on the white screen revitalizes the early mirror phase for the spectator. The powerful and attractive heroes in the film function as ideal mirror images for the viewer, who can narcissistically identify with them. For feminist film theorists cinema

poses the problem that the active male hero offers ideal images for identification, whereas the image of the passive woman offers no such visual pleasure for the female spectator.

As the structures of voyeurism (the desire to *have* the other) and narcissism (the desire to *be* the other) are both geared toward the pleasures of a male audience, the female viewer has no other option but to identify with a male gaze or adopt a marginal or masochistic viewing position. Consequently, feminist activists – ranging from theorists to filmmakers – have tried to create a female gaze and develop visual pleasures for a female audience. Questions of a black women's gaze and a lesbian gaze were soon included in this quest. The notion of the gaze as a device in power relations between the "races" was further developed in black studies (Hall 1997).

Moving away from cinema, the gaze also pertains to panopticism in society. A panoptic gaze is a form of disciplinary power involving techniques of control and regulation. Michel Foucault (1979) argues that modern societies have installed technologies of surveillance to discipline their subjects. Contemporary forms of surveillance, such as the routine use of CCTV cameras, but also the ubiquity of media in the public realm, produce an anonymous and authoritative panoptic gaze. Feminists have argued that the disciplining effect of the panoptic gaze is internalized by women in their relation to their own body.

SEE ALSO: Feminism and Psychoanalysis; Feminist Film Theory; Popular Culture and

Gender; Visual Culture; Visual Culture and Gender

REFERENCES

- Beauvoir, Simone de. 2009. *The Second Sex*. London: Cape.
- Berger, John. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Foucault, Michel. 1979. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Hall, Stuart, ed. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1989. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 14–26. London: Macmillan. First published 1974.

FURTHER READING

- Baudry, Jean-Louis. 1992. "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus." In *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, edited by Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy, 302–312. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1953. "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 7. London: Hogarth.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1977. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." In *Écrits: A Selection*, 1–7. New York: Norton.
- Metz, Christian. 1977. *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. London: Macmillan.
- Smelik, Anneke. 2007. "Feminist Film Theory." In *The Cinema Book*, edited by Pam Cook, 491–504. London: British Film Institute.