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Gazing Upon Genders

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Films offer viewers something which real life does not. They allow the audience to peek into another world or at least into someone else's life. It is as if these watchers are peering through someone's window, watching without being noticed. In this way, movies feed an appetite for voyeurism. Reality is lapsed as the viewer vicariously participates in the on-screen life of those he or she watches. The art and the desire of the watching influences the ways in which films are made. These influences inevitably determine gender roles through each character's personality, movement and attractiveness. Therefore, women are gazed at in ways in which men are not. Men are multi-dimensional characters of depth and purpose.

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Laura Mulvey explains this point of view in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." She says that three different ways of looking are involved in films: "that of the camera as it records the profilmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion" (68). All three of these types of looking differ according to the gender at which the gaze is being directed. Woman is more often than not the object of the gaze. She is made to be desirable. If the man is being watched, it is not because he is desirable, but instead because he can be related to as a person.

According to Mulvey, gazing at a woman in such a way causes two sorts of reactions. One is that of pleasure. This pleasurable response can be seen in the first few minutes of Roger Vadim's 1956 film, *Et Dieu créa...la femme*. Vadim, a former journalist and photographer, directs this film, which is noted to be a predecessor of the New Wave movement in French film. The film follows Juliette, played by Brigitte Bardot, (Vadim's wife at the time), who is a young and vivacious woman. From the beginning she is known as being an orphan. This title is not only because of a lack of biological parents, but also because of the fact that she does not relate well to the world around her. Instead, she chooses to be more free spirited and answers only to her own will. This causes a clash with the world in which the other characters live.

Being the forbidden fruit, she is seen as the object of desire to both the audience as well as three male characters within the movie. Aside from these, the other characters may find her attractive, but she disgusts them because of her lack of morals and more importantly, her unwillingness to conform. Even after marrying, she does not settle down and take on the prescribed duties of a wife. She continues to wander freely and without direction. By the end of the film, this freeness is disrupted by an action, which causes her to lapse into the world of the social norm. This action, a slap by her husband, causes her to submit and follow him obediently, leaving the viewer feeling as though the patriarchal society always has the upper hand and ultimate control.

During the opening moments, as Juliette is sprawled out on a blanket while sunbathing naked in her yard we are engaged in the act of seeing Woman as pleasurable. The camera moves along the curves of her body, evoking a sexual image for the viewers in the audience as well as within the movie itself. This image creates a desire for her on both sides of the screen, in accordance to Mulvey's theory.

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with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" (63). She even says that women "can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (62-3). Consequently, by the way in which the camera watches her, viewers on both sides of the screen are able to look at her pleasurably. This look seems to be naturally defined as a part of who women are.

Along with pleasure, women can be a source of pain. This completes a sort of paradox of women according to Mulvey. She explains, "she also connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure" (64). Woman is a symbol of pain to the man even if she seems desirable. Juliette, though beautiful, is a pain to all the men who love her. She betrays her husband, Michél, and causes him great anguish by sleeping with his brother, Antoine. Antoine saves her life by rescuing her from a drowning boat (which she foolishly sails away on by herself, all the time not realizing that the repairs have not yet been completed). After the rescue, they fall into each other's arms while alone on the beach. After returning home, Michél discovers what has happened, but even still he claims that he loves her. She becomes more uncontrollable towards the end and seems to slipping from his grasp until he finds her dancing provocatively in a bar. Mulvey's paradox is present here because even though he is hurt and disgusted, he stops to watch her before making a move. Even in pain, he is still overcome by her pleasing figure.

The act of looking can cause both pain and pleasure to the onlooker. It can do likewise to the object herself. Cléo in Agnès Varda's 1961 film, *Cléo de 5 à 7*, desires the gaze. Varda was a revolutionary in her field being that she was an early female filmmaker. Her films centered on real social contexts and viewed the world through feminist eyes. This early movement in feminism is apparent in Cléo. The film follows the character through a typical day. The movie is shot in real time, pursuing Cléo for two straight hours of her daily life. The movie begins with showing Cléo having her fortune read. It is obvious from the start that something is wrong and that she is suffering from some health ailment. As she leaves the fortuneteller's house, her true self within the world around her becomes very apparent to the viewer. Cléo receives the gaze as she walks through her world. She is surrounded by both observers and mirrors allowing her to view herself as well. She is very concerned with her appearance as she does things such as purchasing a hat and doing stretching exercises. Her world revolves around being looked at and gaining attention. She even enjoys looking at herself in mirrors which are placed throughout the movie. Through psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan explains this fascination with mirrors:

> The image recognized is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject which, re-introjected as an ego ideal, prepares the way for identification with others in the future. (Mulvey 61)

Cléo identifies herself as the image within the mirror. If this image were to ever disappear, which it does, she would not know what to do and would be lost without receiving the gaze.

The metaphorical mirror, or ego ideal, breaks once Cléo takes off her wig and looks deeply into the mirror. Truly looking at and within herself for the first time, she states, "I thought everyone looked at me. I only look at myself." The process of self-actualization within her happens at this point. Both Cléo and the outer world view her differently. Suddenly no one is casting the gaze onto her. Finally the physical mirror breaks when it is accidentally dropped and thus her facade is gone. She must then attempt to assimilate herself into a society which is both foreign and frightening to her. It's a society in which she is the looker and not the looked at.

Cléo and Juliette are not the only ones to be looked at. Their male counterparts are also present, but the act of watching them is different. The males of these films are not desirable, sexual objects. Mulvey makes this important difference:

> In contrast to woman as icon, the active male figure (the ego ideal of the identification process) demands a three-dimen-

> sional space corresponding to that of the mirror recognition, in which the alienated subject internalized his own representation of his imaginary existence. (64)

The man is a powerful protagonist who is able to make things happen and have control over events.

His pleasurable appearance is not of greatest importance, but rather it is his ability to command the scene which causes viewers to identify with him.

Michél in *Et Dieu* is an example of this. Though he at first seems like a weak and passive male, he proves to be the stereotypical active male in the end. When Juliette does not listen to him, he takes control and slaps her. This action calls both Juliette and Michél to the world of the patriarchal society. Prior to this action, Michél is very passive. Before being fully caught within the realms of the paradox of woman, he did not dominate her, but rather allowed her freedom. Once the pleasure is assisted with pain, he steps into the typical male role and attempts to take hold of his property. Through this act of physical aggression, he shows his dominance and in doing so, becomes an authority figure to whom the viewers can perhaps relate.

In a more subtle way, Antoine is a similar character to Cléo. Though he does not resort to physical violence, he is able to control her and assist her in her struggle. She is lost when the gaze leaves her and is only saved when she meets Antoine in the park. Prior to this chance meeting, Cléo does not know Antoine. They begin a conversation in which it is revealed that he is leaving in a few hours to fight the war in Algeria. They are together for only a limited amount of time, making it pleasurable for both, but not allowing for a deep enough relationship to create pain. Because the paradox cannot be completed within the short amount of time, he acts as more of an equal to her than a superior as most other men do. He gazes at her, but in a different way. He is caring and compassionate. He is a father figure to her. Even still, his calmness and subtle leading shows his dominance over her.

It is important to note how different the women react to these men. The final scenes separate the two women. The ending for Juliette is not only important because of the actions of Michél, but also because of whom she becomes. Mulvey says, "woman's desire is subjugated to her image as a bearer of the bleeding wound; she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it" (59). Juliette is nothing more than pain to Michél. She fulfills the prescribed role, the paradox of Woman, which Mulvey discusses and proves her point.

On the contrary, Cléo does not fill that role. She does not cause pain for Antoine or any other man within the film. She is a character who is independent of others. She holds only superficial relationships of admiration, which crumble when the gaze leaves her. She is never the "bearer of the bleeding wound" to a man, but only to herself because of her own internal conflict and in this way is contrary to Mulvey.

An important factor can account for these differences. It is important to note that in the film which upholds the paradox of woman, the director, Vadim, is male. On the contrary, Varda, an early feminist, female director does not subjugate her character to such a guise. Instead, she allows Cléo to evolve apart from male dominance. She offers only temporary male companionship to Cléo during her truest moment of loneliness and despair. Varda proves that though Mulvey's view may be correct in analyzing the majority of films, there are important and prevalent exceptions.

The directors of films have the ability to create the look through the direction of the characters within the film as well as how the camera captures each character. The way in which the film is shot, directly affects how the viewer perceives each character. This allows for the man to be reasoned with and respected and the woman to be simply the object as Mulvey sees the definitive roles as being. But there are directors who challenge these prescribed roles. Varda, as well as others, operate in a way which allows the female character, being Cléo, to move away from being the actual object of the gaze. In doing so, the viewer relates to her in a new way. She is not just seen as a desire, but she is seen as someone who is on a journey. Once the mirror breaks, she is not just a one-dimensional reflection, but she is a real, three-dimensional person.

Varda is able to not only challenge Mulvey's theory of the gaze, but also the paradox of woman. Because Cléo is not the object of desire during the second part of the movie, she is not seen as the pleasure or the pain. She does not threaten to castrate any men within the movie, but instead she is an independent

entity. Contrary to Mulvey, she is able to operate by her own free will and accord. At first she is lost and spends most of this time searching for the gaze, but she is never able to reclaim it. Instead she enters a new world in which she is allowed to cast forth the gaze. But even in entering this world, she is still not able to claim power and control as a male gazer does. She is in a sort of limbo between worlds. Though she does challenge Mulvey's theories, she still allows for the point that women do not have the ultimate power within films.

The uneven world of gender roles can be seen in several aspects of life. By allowing for voyeuristic pleasure in films, women are seen as the desirable objects. They are little more than a pleasure to the senses. Men on the other hand are able to gaze in both pleasure and pain, as well as provoke identification. Receiving it is not just through physical admiration, but through recognition of power and control. As Juliette lies sprawled out, sunbathing in the nude, the male arrives in full suit and tie. There is no ability to see him in the same sexual manner. As he hovers over her in full attire, each viewer mentally notes his dominance. Likewise, as each camera angle fluidly marks the exact curve of a woman's body and notes the man's prowess, pleasures will continue to be found in the woman while the power to gaze remains in the man's domain.

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