

Is it possible to break free from the male gaze?

A gaze is not the same as a simple look. A gaze implies a relationship of imbalanced power, in which the gazer is superior to the subject of the gaze. The term 'male gaze' was coined in 1975 by British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey. She describes it as the perspective of a heterosexual male that is embodied in an audience of film and other visual media, characterized by the objectification and sexualization of women. It is the representation of women through the often-sexual desires and pleasures of men. The male gaze renders women as passive and entitles men as active, which reproduces and upholds an already overwhelmingly patriarchal society. Breaking free from the male gaze may be difficult- but is, by no means, impossible. We can alter the role of women in media to reclaim womanhood and portray feminism in a healthy way. To subvert the male gaze further, we can take steps to engage in important conversation and activism to lift and empower women.

Although the male gaze is present in every corner of society, the concept is most palpable in television and film. Behind the screen lies a deeper implication, as film is often a reflection of the society that surrounds it. As detailed in feminist theory, women watch films from a secondary perspective: they view themselves from the perspective of men. Female protagonists often lack depth and complexity and are present to accommodate the male fantasy alone. They only exist in relation to the male and are viewed as trophies to be won or used. When watching a film of this nature, women end up gazing upon other women through the male gaze, consequently objectifying each other. This pattern not only determines the relationship between men and women, but also the relation of women to *themselves*. Male viewers identify with the powerful male

protagonists who lead the plot. Likewise, women identify with the female characters, and want to be desired similarly to the sexualized portrayals of women on screen. A shift in the role of women in popular culture and media is imperative to counter this reality and eliminate the male gaze. In film, there is one characteristic that all stereotypical female characters share: passivity. Hollywood has familiarized us with the helpless female archetype that has become synonymous with the horror genre. When the female victim grabs the weapon from her attacker, however, the roles shift. The vulnerable individual becomes the empowered- she is breaking away from the order of patriarchy, transcending her pre-constructed role as a passive woman. Her gender no longer limits her, and it never should have in the first place. Furthermore, the media we consume and produce needs to be diversified. The floor can be opened to gazers of different sexualities, ethnicities, and social backgrounds. Representation sparks conversation, and conversation is crucial for change.

Although we can make a change in popular culture and media, the male gaze is still ingrained within society itself. One of the reasons the male gaze is such a nuanced theory is the fact that the patriarchy has existed since the dawn of time. Work to eliminate the male gaze can be done on an individual level to dismantle the internalized lies of society. Whether it's judging a woman for wearing too much makeup or 'too short' of a dress, people participate in the male gaze every single day. It is difficult to unlearn ideas that have been instilled upon us by society, and the internalized male gaze is arguably the most difficult to depart from. For many women, feeling good about the way they look and dressing for their own contentment is a form of liberation from this phenomenon.

We can break free from the male gaze through conversation that challenges the concept. People may recognize the many faults of the male gaze but may not know how to address it. The prominence of the male gaze in media can also deter women from speaking out against it, because it has become commonplace. Cultural messages and stereotypes get their power from the alienation of their victimized parties. Engaging in activism to subvert the male gaze is a journey that women must undertake collectively; solidarity can be found in other women's experiences. Change can also be created in the viewpoints and experiences of men, in other words, we can 'turn the magnifying glass into a mirror'. How would men react if their gaze was turned on themselves?... What if they considered the way it affects their mothers, sisters, partners, and daughters? Instead of requesting that women change their actions, men must be educated. If we begin now, we can tear away existing stigmas for generations of women that follow. Until activism and societal changes are implemented, the male gaze will never disappear.

Even though it does not create a social construct like the male gaze, some argue that there is also a female gaze to consider. The two theories are not comparable, as the objectification of men is not equivalent to the objectification of women. Generally, the traits that women fetishize in men include strength, vigor, and power- most of which men already possess in a patriarchal society. On the contrary, women are sexualized because of their bodies, to provoke sexual pleasure and depict them as submissive to male authority. The objectification of women is a reminder of a male-dominated society.

Living in the 21st century, we receive most of our information through media channels, apps, and other online platforms. As a result, the way we perceive ourselves and those around us is shaped strongly by representation in the media. The male gaze

can be found in nearly every aspect of our lives; especially in visual media such as films, television, paintings, photography, literature and more. To subvert the male gaze, we can change the lens through which we portray women in popular culture. It's time to do away with the stereotypical damsel-in-distress and make an effort to incorporate more independent female characters and heroines who are free the influence of male ideals. We can also work to break free of the male gaze by striking meaningful conversation and advocate for the healthy treatment and perception of women. Erasing a concept that has dominated society for centuries is not easy, but with the right mentality, it is more than possible.