

PHOTOGRAPHY

## Male and Female Gaze in Photography

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This essay is dedicated to the memory of my maternal grandfather, Professor Vasco Ronchi, who established the Atti della Fondazione Giorgio Ronchi and taught everybody the importance of thinking outside the box. It is also dedicated to my mother, Professor Laura Ronchi Abbozzo, who has singlehandedly curated the publication of the Atti for 30 years, published its books and organised its symposia. They both taught me to question how we see and the importance of the gaze.

*SUMMARY. – This essay surveys the important movement in contemporary photography called "the Female Gaze". It considers the origin of the "male gaze" first, along with its cultural background and implications, and it then focuses on the development and current status of the "female gaze" in contemporary photography.*

### 1. Minting the male gaze

Feminism is a social, cultural and political movement that saw an impetuous growth during the 1960s and 1970s. During those decades the movement directly affected the social and political lives of millions of women across the Western world. At the same time, a fundamental body of critical theory was developed by feminist scholars across the United States and Europe. Feminism became part of the cultural discourse and it affected all branches of thought and artistic practices.

In the visual arts field, two essays in particular proved to be pioneering and game-changing: American art historian's Linda Nochlin 1971 "*Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*"; and British film theorist's Laura Mulvey 1973 "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*".

Nochlin's essay opened the doors to the inclusion of long-ignored female artists in the established art historical canon, and the resonance of her ideas con-

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tinues to this day. Similarly, Mulvey's essay inaugurated the intersection of film theory, psychoanalysis and feminism, and gave women new tools to think about their position in the world. The most important of these new tools was the introduction of the concept of the "male gaze". Here I will examine how this new idea opened up new vistas in the world of cinema and photography.

In her essay Mulvey utilized ideas developed by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan to explore how films are construed. She was not the first to do this, as other film theorists such as Jean Louis Baudry and Cristian Metz had started orientating film theory towards a psychoanalytical framework before her. Mulvey, however, extended her research to explore how cinema expressed and nourished a specifically male point of view, and was the first to theorize the existence of a specific "male gaze".

In substance, the male gaze depicts women and the world from a masculine, heterosexual perspective that presents and represents women as sexual objects for the pleasure of the male viewer.

According to Mulvey, the male gaze in films is construed from three perspectives: that of the man behind the camera, (*cameraman* and film director); that of the male characters within the film's cinematic representations; and finally that of the spectator gazing at the image.

The three different perspectives of the male gaze then unite to cement an extremely powerful social construct which derives from, and propagates, patriarchal ideologies and discourses.

Mulvey was the first one to propose to see that sexual inequality, or the asymmetry of social and political power between men and women, is a controlling social force in the cinematic representations of the sexes.

Stated very simply, the "male gaze" rules how women should look, and their role in life. It routinely hypersexualizes women's bodies in a way that empowers the male viewer and objectifies the woman. Examples are Marilyn Monroe, or James Bond movies. While a woman is being watched, Mulvey argues, she does not have a choice in the matter, and her gaze has no power. This robs her of any power in how she is viewed.

Psychoanalysis clarifies how there is a strong psychological relationship of power involved in the act of looking, and that the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze. Mulvey uses these ideas to further argue that Hollywood films have been created to predispose viewers to identify with men onscreen, and to see women in the movies merely as passive objects, there to be looked at, by both the male characters and the spectator. Even by female spectators.

According to Mulvey, the seductive power of Hollywood is so immense that so immense, women have accepted and internalized "the male gaze". This will be further discussed below.

## Women artists and the male gaze

Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" as the normative gaze, or dominant way of looking, encountered an immediate widespread interest, resonating far from film theory circles. It was quickly adopted in feminist analysis across all visual arts and literature, bearing fruitful results in every field. At the time there was no immediate coinage of an opponent "female gaze". This happened later, as will be discussed further in this essay.

Here, I want to focus on the effects of the "male gaze" in the field of photography.

American Cindy Sherman (born in 1954) started creating her acclaimed series of photo works "Untitled Film Stills" in 1977, shortly after public discussions of Mulvey's theories began. The series is a collection of 69 black and white images, and its creation lasted from 1977 to 1980. The photographs are immediately recognizable as film stills as they consciously imitate typical cinematic angles, lighting, and dramatization. Each image is staged to resemble scenes from old 1950s and 60s Hollywood and European art-house films. Sherman posed for each image, in the guises of a different generic female film character.

In Sherman's photographs every character she interprets looks away from the camera and outside of the frame. She does not engage the gaze of the viewer, therefore accepting the traditional Hollywood female role of being watched. What is radically new is that in posing for each image Sherman becomes both the subject and the author of the work. That is, she assumes a passive and an active role at the same time.

As author of the work, Sherman chose locales, props, and costumes as well as the genre, lighting, and expression of every image. Helen Molesworth has pointed out that Sherman, "beyond being the agent and object of her own drama, is also the interior designer and art director. These professions arbitrate the taste of our culture, creating fantasy spaces (either in our living rooms or in the living rooms of the movies) that provide the cues for our performance of ourselves".<sup>1</sup>

"Untitled Film Stills" can be seen to signal the beginning of a profound cultural change. This body of work helped bring about the then-new idea that representations, far from being reflections or 'assertions' of our identities, are instead agents in producing them.

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<sup>1</sup> HELEN MOLESWORTH, *The Comfort of Objects*, 10 Sep 1997, [www.frieze.com](http://www.frieze.com), [https://web.archive.org/web/20160112071811/http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/the\\_comfort\\_of\\_objects/](https://web.archive.org/web/20160112071811/http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/the_comfort_of_objects/)



Cindy Sherman - Untitled Film Stills #21, 1978



Cindy Sherman - Untitled Film Stills #28, 1979



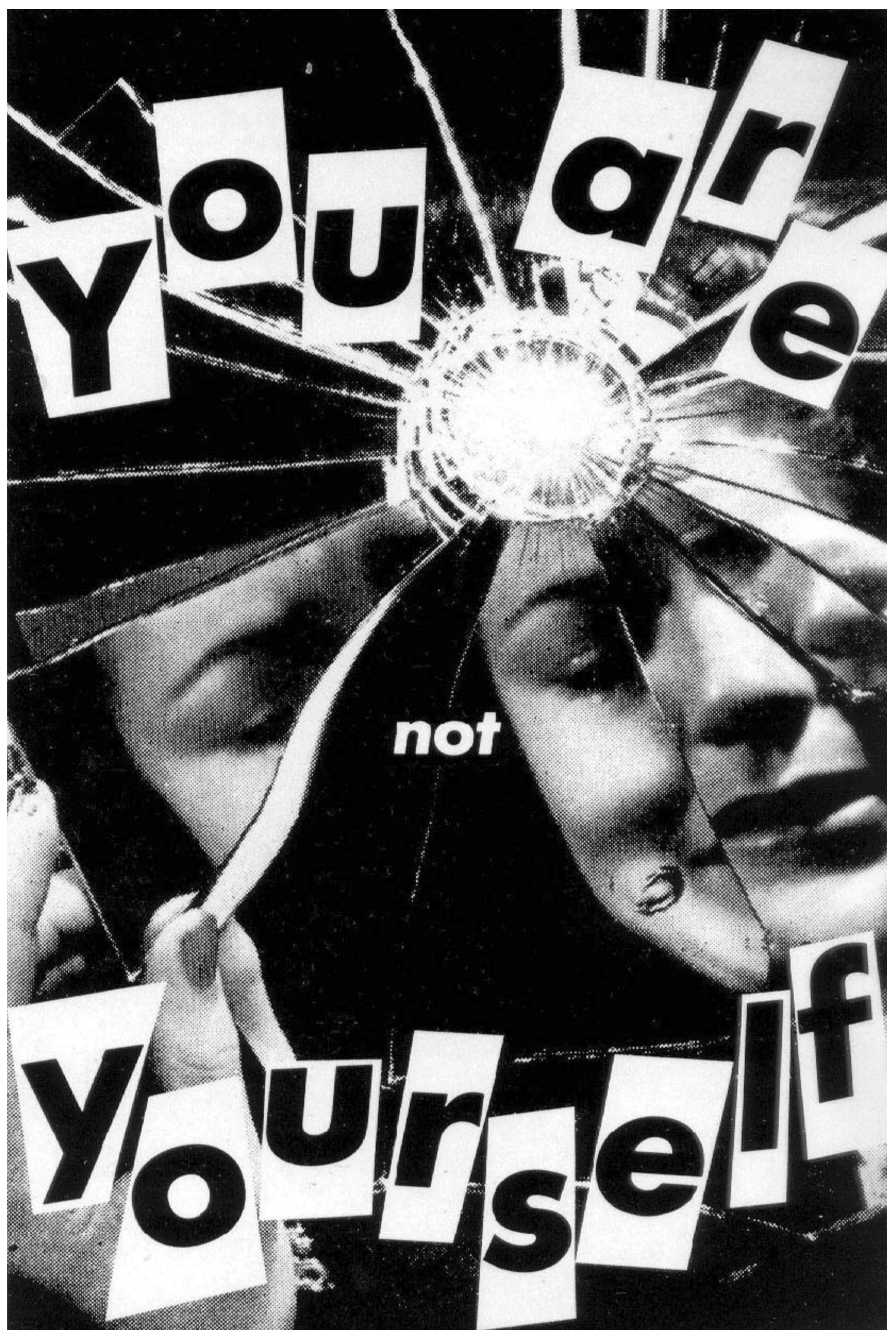


Cindy Sherman - *Untitled Film Stills #15*, 1978

Questions of identities and gender are also at the centre of the work of American artist Barbara Kruger (born 1945). After working for a decade as graphic designer, art director, and picture editor at Condé Nast Publications, she started creating personal artworks. These brought together found images and text, always with a striking impact.



Barbara Kruger, *Your gaze hits the side of my face*, 1981



Barbara Kruger, *You are not yourself*, 1984



All Kruger's work is openly political, socially oriented, and unashamedly feminist. She often cleverly included personal pronouns in her works in order to implicate viewers and to confound any clear notion of who is speaking. Her images served, and still do today, as direct commentaries on religion, sex, racial and gender stereotypes, consumerism, corporate greed, and power.

Kruger's works had enormous resonance, also thanks to her decision to distribute them widely on everyday objects like umbrellas, tote bags, postcards, mugs, T-shirts, posters. This further confused the boundaries between art and commerce and at the same time began to call attention to the role of advertising in public debate.



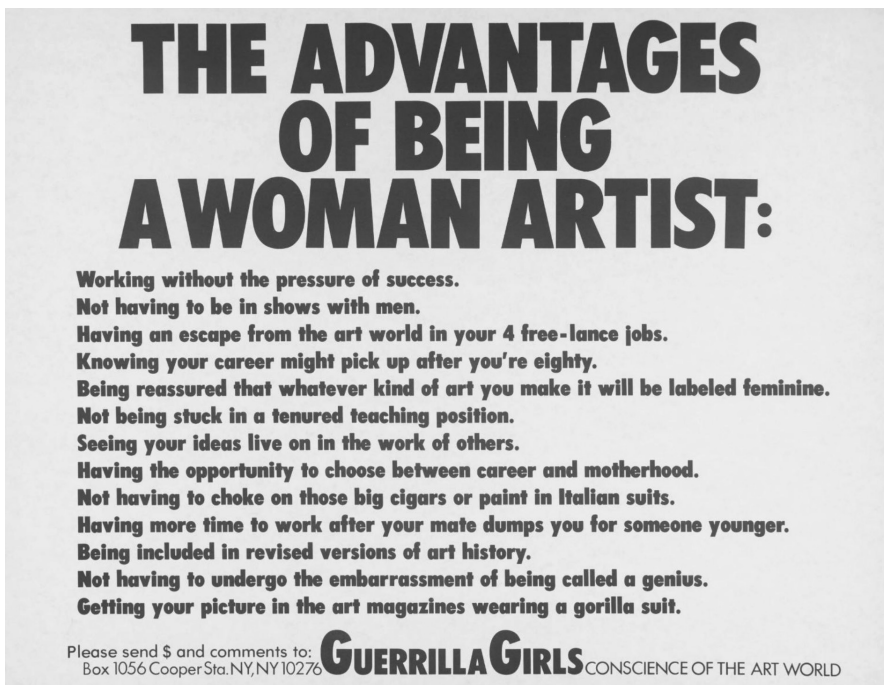
Barbara Kruger, *We don't need another hero*, 1985

In those same years, public debate was continuously solicited to reconsider women's position by the work of various art collectives as well. One of the better known collectives is the New York group Guerrilla Girls.

Formed in 1985, the group chose to preserve the anonymity of its members in order to focus public attention on its fight against gender and racial inequality within the greater arts community. Anonymity was achieved by its members donning gorilla masks during public outings. The collective created extremely effective posters, books, billboards, and public appearances to expose discrimination in a clever, effective, humorous and at the same time hard-hitting manner.



Guerrilla Girls, Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?  
1989



Guerrilla Girls, The Advantages of being a woman artist, 1988

### Male and female gazes in fashion photography

In those same years the great shifts introduced by feminist theory on the male gaze also influenced female photographers that were working in the field of fashion photography. In particular, two female photographers subverted the

cultural stereotypes that were rampant in the work of star fashion photographers Guy Bourdin, Helmut Newton, and Chris von Wangenheim, all of whom were at the time developing a hypersexualized, quintessentially “male gaze” body of work, ostentatiously bent on objectifying women. The two women were French/British model turned photographer Sarah Moon (real name Marcelle Hadengue, born 1941) and American photographer Deborah Turbeville (1932-2013).

Sarah Moon worked in the field of fashion photography from the early 1970s, while also creating her own personal, non-commercial work. In both areas she resisted the dominant “male gaze” which objectified women and turned them into sex objects. She chose instead to create soft, romantic, often melancholy images, that seemed to exist “outside of time”, as was often remarked at the time. Moon worked both in black and white and in colour photography, creating a strikingly original body of work which has since been inspiring for many photographers, both male and female. She is still active today, and in 2018 was been honoured by two important exhibitions in Milan, one at Armani Silos and the other at 10 Corso Como Gallery.

Deborah Turbeville also developed a very distinctive, “male gaze” – resistant way of photographing women. Starting in the 1970s she created an alternative view of womanhood. Her subjects were not the glamorous, glossy women (often defined “glamazons”) of her contemporary male colleagues. Rather, they were “full of private desires and longing, existing in the crumbling grandeur of country houses and their drawing rooms, in forests or deserted bathhouses”<sup>2</sup>. Her images evoked haunted feelings, often reinforced by the fact that Turbeville would deliberately scratch her negatives with dust, to suggest damage caused by the passing of time. She collaborated for many years with the fashion house of Valentino, and recently Pier Paolo Piccioli, Valentino Creative Director since 2016, has quoted a 1977 Turbeville image as the inspiration behind his 2018 collection.

Thanks to the work of all the female artists and photographers discussed so far, the subversive fight against the “male gaze” became a central element in the development of the feminist discourse.

The recognition that a “male gaze” was powerfully built into mainstream visuals, from cinema to photography, influenced writers and thinkers in every field. Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, for example, has analysed it in many of her books. She discussed it at length in her 1993 book *The Robber Bride*: “Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or down on your knees, it’s all a male fantasy: that you’re strong enough to take what they dish out, or else too weak to do anything. Even pretending you aren’t catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you’re unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious

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<sup>2</sup> Jack Moss, in *The Haunting 1970s Photograph Behind Valentino Couture* <http://www.anothermag.com/fashion-beauty/10531/the-haunting-1970s-photograph-behind-valentino-couture>



of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur”.<sup>3</sup>

The widespread recognition and denunciation of the “male gaze” in the rich and varied panorama of artists, thinkers, and writers of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s brought about the alternative idea of a “female gaze”.

## Defining the Female Gaze

While the definition of the “male gaze” seems clear cut, that of the “female gaze” is more complex. It is also puzzling that at the beginning of 2019, it is hard to determine when and by whom the term was first used.

Various thinkers and artists have underlined this point. American director and writer Jill Soloway for example discussed it in a 2016 Tiff talk <sup>4</sup>. In trying to precisely define the female gaze, author Debbie Ridgard pointed out that Soloway had distinguished three important components: first, a use of the frame “to make the audience actually feel the emotions and not just watch the feelings on-screen”<sup>5</sup>; then, “feelings and emotions are prioritised over actions and bodies are used as tools to portray emotions. Showing how it feels to be the object of the gaze- the camera speaks out as the receiver of the gaze and actually depicts the gaze itself” (...).<sup>6</sup>

And, finally, “returning the gaze- acknowledging the influence of the male gaze culture on people and attempting to shift the protagonist from being the object to being the subject. It’s not a gender-reversal placing the women in power, rather removing women as the object and allowing the viewer see this shift”.<sup>7</sup>

Shortly after Soloway’s talk, Charlotte Jansen, who is an editor-at-large at arts publication Elephant Magazine as well as the director of independent curatorial label NO WAY, published the book *Girl on Girl, Art and Photography in the age of the Female Gaze*, in 2017.

Trying to single out any element that might define the ‘female gaze’, Jansen sees at least three particular trends: “I think creating a world at home – constructing the reality you want to see rather than going out into the world to explore it with the camera – is a dominant tendency shared among female gazers.

Also, revisiting history through images – either through photographs or paintings of the past – to interrupt, disrupt and reinvent it, is something I have seen happening, and that’s really interesting.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride*, McClelland and Stewart, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Jill Soloway on The Female Gaze, MASTER CLASS, TIFF 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnBvppooD9I&t=18s>

<sup>5</sup> Debbie Ridgard, April 17, 2017: <http://thecircular.org/female-gaze-for-dummies/>

<sup>6</sup> Debbie Ridgard, op.cit.

<sup>7</sup> Ib.

I think the female gaze is completely unlimited in terms of topics though. It's definitely not limited to feminism and femininity".<sup>8</sup>

Importantly, Jansen underlines the fact that "‘Female gaze’ isn't just the liberally applied term for a female photographer (...) It is not a question of gender or sexuality. It's a whole new way of seeing the world, differently to the rigid, vertical male gaze that dominates".<sup>9</sup>

She stresses out that it is important that the "female gaze" is not defined as the counterpart to the objectifying "male gaze". According to her, a female gaze "is a gaze that seeks to question why we look at women the way we do, what we can learn by looking at women in different ways, and how by looking at images of women photographed by women we can begin to undo eons of objectification".<sup>10</sup>

The three elements identified by Soloway and Jansen can be usefully applied to survey contemporary photography, where the term "Female gaze" has gained currency since 2016.

The term started being used in discussions relating to the works of a group of new, young photographers that emerged around the mid-2010. The photographers in this group are all "Millennials", as the generation of people born between 1980 and 2000 is now called. They are all digital native and very conversant in the use of social media.

### Art in the age of social media

Social media has changed the cultural landscape of our times. More specifically, the arrival of social networking platforms has profoundly affected how images are seen around the globe. Tumblr, one of the earliest microblogging and social networking website and the most important one for our research here, was founded in 2007. It was the first to offer everybody the possibility to upload work independently. This chance was immediately exploited by legions of young image-makers and photographers around the planet. User activity became very intense very quickly. The number of blog posts each day reached over 100 million in early 2014, to settle at around 30 million by October 2018.<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that "as of June 1, 2018, Tumblr hosts over 417.1 million blogs and more than 161.3 billion posts in total, and over 29 million posts were created on the site each day".<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Vanessa Hsieh, A comprehensive guide to girl on girl photography, <http://www.dazed-digital.com/photography/article/35505/1/a-comprehensive-guide-to-girl-on-girl-photography>

<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Jansen, *Girl on Girl: Art and Photography in the Age of the Female Gaze*, Laurence King Publishing, 2017

<sup>10</sup> Elyssa Goodman, 40 Artists Address the Female Gaze in 'Girl on Girl' Photo Book, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_au/article/pg5qq7/girl-on-girl-photo-book-female-gaze-40-artists](https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/pg5qq7/girl-on-girl-photo-book-female-gaze-40-artists).

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/221565/total-cumulative-number-of-tumblr-posts/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tumblr>

It is easy to understand that art and artistic expressions have been enormously affected by social media. Art in the age of social media is one of the most intensely studied topics today and thanks to the continuous technological advances it is a constantly evolving panorama.<sup>13</sup>

Before the age of the World Wide Web and the invention of social media, it was only prominent, male art critics who decided which art entered the canon. Only very few men held the power to determine which artists were “good” or interesting, and which were not. One of the most important changes brought about by internet has been that social media and sites like Tumblr completely subverted that situation to create a totally new cultural landscape. Today no art critic has the exclusive power to make or break an artist’s career. And anyone with a smart phone can decide by themselves who to “like”, “follow”, or buy.

Moreover, social media seal the process of collapsing of the worlds of art, fashion, and advertising that had started in the 1980s, to create content that is easier to make, share, and consume thanks to constant “conversations” among the two billion smartphone users around the world, who on average check their devices about 150 times a day.<sup>14</sup>

In short, the creation of social media platforms has given the world new means to access art, has transformed art, and it has also given young and undiscovered artists the totally novel opportunity to promote their work directly.

As Hayley Prokos noted in 2015 “Etsy, a platform which allows artists and artisans to open their own virtual store, was one of the first to catapult this movement in 2005. The e-commerce company succeeded in creating a virtual connection between buyers and sellers and popularized the notion of artists as entrepreneurs”.<sup>15</sup>

Tumblr, Facebook, and more recently Instagram, have become the gateways to success for many artists, allowing them to create their own virtual gallery and publicize their work, without depending on art critics’ judgements.

Millennials have been quick to exploit these possibilities. Tumblr in particular has been their site of choice to upload work, and some of them have been spotted immediately and have since had stellar careers.

## **Female gaze for Millennials**

The most outspoken, important and well known of these artists is Hungarian/American Petra Collins, born in 1992. Collins works both as a photographer and a model, and creates corporate ad campaigns (for Adidas and Gucci among others)

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<sup>13</sup> See on this topic Jia Jia Fei’s 2015 talk *Art in the Age of Instagram* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DLNFDQt8Pc>

<sup>14</sup> Gideon Grudo, *Culture of Proximity 2.0: Fame in the age of social media*, <https://www.viacom.com/news/viacom-velocity-culture-of-proximity-fame>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.wunderkid.co/art-in-the-age-of-social-media/>

as well as music videos. She is outspoken in her opinion, which seem to derive straight from Guerrilla Girls' works : "You can walk into a museum like the Met or MoMA and less than five per cent of the work is created by women. It's hard for us to see a place in society where there is space to produce and share ideas of our own", she stated in 2017<sup>16</sup>.

Consequently she is very active in promoting a new awareness for girls. She has not only created The Arduous, "a platform for female artists showcasing individual and collaborative projects between a collective of female creative professionals – all full of ardour but each with a unique artistic style and voice"<sup>17</sup>; she has also been very vocal in reclaiming an alternative view of the "selfie", a phenomenon still largely deprecated by the dominant cultural discourse.

While photographic self-portraits have been around since the invention of photography, "selfies" began to appear in force from 2010. The first front-facing camera had been introduced on smartphones in 2003. But it was the arrival of the iPhone 4, which came along with a front-facing camera, that made the selfie go viral".<sup>18</sup>

There has been intense analysis of this new cultural phenomenon, because selfies have revolutionised how people gather autobiographical information about themselves and their friends. Taking selfies is reviled by most mainstream critics as navel-gazing and vain, but it is considered important by others, who believe that taking selfies "it's about continuously rewriting yourself. It's an extension of our natural construction of self".<sup>19</sup>

For these group, social media like Tumblr, Instagram (which arrived in 2010) and others, have allowed the public to reclaim photography as a source of empowerment. They have offered "a quiet resistance to the barrage of perfect images that we face each day. Rather than being bombarded with those creations... we can look through our Instagram feed and see images of real people – with beautiful diversity".<sup>20</sup>

Petra Collins shares these view. "The selfie, especially, has revolutionised the way that we are able to represent ourselves. It makes it possible for people who have little representation to create images of their own, and because of social media we have platforms for them".<sup>21</sup>

Her work has gained worldwide attention thanks to her savvy use of social platforms, especially Tumblr, which she began to utilise when still a teenager. Her images have been immediately seen as typical of this new "female gaze" phenomenon and were selected for the exhibition created in Milan by the late Vogue Italia

<sup>16</sup> Monique Todd in <http://www.dazeddigital.com/projects/article/29303/1/petra-collins>

<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.theardorous.com/about/>

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Day, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/jul/14/how-selfies-became-a-global-phenomenon>

<sup>19</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>21</sup> Monique Todd in <http://www.dazeddigital.com/projects/article/29303/1/petra-collins>



Petra Collins, *Selfie (Aly)*, 2014

Editor-in-chief, Franca Sozzani (1950-2016), shortly before her death. Celebrated for her unique vision that united photography, fashion, and current politics, Sozzani chose to dedicate the first Vogue Photo Festival to the exploration of “The Female Gaze in Fashion Photography”.

The exhibition took place in Milan in 2016 and brought together the work of 47 image-makers. Co-curated by Alessia Glaviano and Chiara Bardelli Nonino, the exhibition was a chronological, themed investigation into the importance of the “female act of claiming back the lens whilst redefining a woman’s female gaze toward another woman”, as the curators wrote. This “is very much a subversive act, one loaded with socio-political implications and it is one of the only true revolutions occurred in fashion photography over the last ten years. The ‘female gaze’ is a reassertion of the woman’s identity, of the idea of a different kind of beauty – that is less artificial – of a more complex and multifaceted femininity and of the right to self-represent one’s body”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.vogue.it/en/photo-vogue-festival/exhibition/2016/11/15/the-female-gaze-show/>

The exhibition included works ranging from Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* to Petra Collins contemporary take, in the conviction that "the female gaze does not stop in front of and is not afraid of blemishes, imperfections, taboo topics or clichés but portrays the female universe in all its endless complexities".<sup>23</sup>

The photographers included in the exhibition "show the female body for what it is – sensual, vulnerable, idealized or with imperfections"<sup>24</sup> and are "part of a broader discourse aimed at enriching the way of looking at the world, freeing it from stereotypes whilst adding another point of view, one that has been ignored for centuries, censored, belittled and forgotten: the female gaze's point of view".<sup>25</sup>

Many other young photographers are part of this movement today. Amongst the most notable are British Harley Weir and Juno Caypsio, Spanish Coco Capitan, New York based British Charlotte Wales, North Americans Cass Bird and Molly Soda, Swedish Arvyda Bystrom, Iranian-American Amanda Charchian, Chinese Luo Yang, Australian Phebe Schmitdt, and many others.



Arvyda Bystrom, 2016

<sup>23</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>24</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>25</sup> *ibidem*





Phebe Schmitdt, 2013

The works of many of the young women photographers exploring the female gaze today move seamlessly between the world of art, photography, and fashion. This reflects an important shift from high art to an all-embracing culture<sup>26</sup> which began in the 1980s and is now fully mainstream. Harley Weir, Coco Capitan, Cass Bird, Petra Collins, Arvida Bystrom and many others, all work at ease in the fashion industry alongside producing their own work.

In the fashion industry meanwhile, in 2016 a woman has been appointed to lead the creative side of fashion house Dior for the first time in the label's history. And Italian Maria Grazia Chiuri, born in 1964, has revolutionized the fashion panorama with her strong feminist beliefs from her very first show for Dior.

She has stated that "Dior is feminine, that's what I kept hearing when I told people I was coming here. But as a woman, 'feminine' means something different to me than it means to a man, perhaps. Feminine is about being a woman, no? I thought to myself: if Dior is about femininity, then it is about women. And not about what it was to be a woman 50 years ago, but to be a woman today".<sup>27</sup>

To make her point of view clear, for her Dior debut in 2016, Maria Grazia Chiuri sent on to the catwalk a T-shirt with the slogan "We Should All Be Feminists", the title of a famous Ted Talk given by Nigerian feminist writer Chima-

<sup>26</sup> Melanie Abrams, Fashion Photography Is the Art World's Rising Star, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/18/fashion/fashion-photography-emerges-with-new-respect.html>

<sup>27</sup> Lauren Collins, <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/maria-grazia-chiuri-dior-feminism>

manda Ngozi Adichie in 2012<sup>28</sup>. Before the show, Dior released a statement that championed Adichie's work examining the question of racism and the place of women in society.

"Before, nobody used the word feminist because they thought it was a bad word", Chiuri has said. "The problem sometimes comes from women themselves. They say, 'Oh no, I'm not a feminist.' But do they know what it means? The word means equal opportunity. You can be both feminist and feminine. Why not?"<sup>29</sup>

She has since continued to introduce feminist themes in her catwalk presentations. In her 2018 collection she has quoted the essay that inaugurated feminist readings of Art History, Linda Nochlin's famous 1971 essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?". She had the sentence embroidered on sweaters and gave a copy of the text to everyone who attended the defiles.

In every collection she produces, Chiuri continues to find inspiration in the works of several woman artists, ranging from Georgia O'Keeffe to Sonya Delaunay and Nicky de Saint Phalle.

For her Fall/Winter 2019 show, Chiuri turned to Italian conceptual artist Tomaso Binga. Binga is a woman, real name Bianca Pucciarelli Menna, born in 1931, who in the 1970s signed her work with a man's name to protest male privilege in the art world. At the show, Binga read a poem on the victory of feminism over patriarchy. The scenography of the defile was entirely composed of photographs of a naked, younger Binga, in positions that spelled the letters of the alphabet and were arranged to spell one of her poems.



<sup>28</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_we\\_should\\_all\\_be\\_feminists](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_we_should_all_be_feminists)

<sup>29</sup> Nadja Spiegelman, <https://www.glamour.com/story/women-of-the-year-2017-maria-grazia-chiuri>



Chiuri also continued her series of t-shirts bearing feminist logos, presenting one that read *Sisterhood is global*, the title of the classic work by American feminist activist and author, Robin Morgan.

Endearingly, Chiuri is influenced in her choice of feminist writer and artists by her young daughter Rachele Regini, who is studying Art History at Goldsmith in London. She has also often spoken about how influenced she has been by *Women Who Run With The Wolves*, Clarissa Estés' 1992 book about the Wild Woman archetype and the patriarchy's attempts to suppress her force in society.

Chiuri has not only powerfully introduced new ideas about femininity in fashion. She has also chosen to commission Dior campaigns to female photographers, extending the sense of female empowerment through a project titled "The Women Behind the Lens".

For her initiative Chiuri chose nine female photographers. Each was asked to give her interpretation of the Dior Spring/Summer 2017 collection through a

visual campaign. Chiuri has worked with, among others, North American Nan Goldin, notorious for her 1980s “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency”, an important photo work, and later a book, about her friends in New York communities of emarginated young; with French Brigitte Lacombe, a very well respected photographer with a long career in documentary photography; with Italian conceptual photographer Brigitte Niedermair; and with French war photographer Christine Spengler.

Each one of the photographers included in the project has been chosen because of the female gaze inherent in her work.



Brigitte Niedermair, Oukhet/ Sister “Ich Liebe dich”, 2005

All these voices agree that defining femininity in 2019 is a complex endeavour. Simple definitions are not possible anymore. As photographer Amanda Charchian has stated, “the notion of what is feminine is always expanding, espe-

cially in political terms in which feminism is no longer cisgender and heteronormative”.<sup>30</sup>

These ideas are shared by many young women artist and photographers working in the visual arts today, who continue using social media to open new pathways.

Among these is British supermodel Adwoa Aboah who created Gurls Talk as an online community for young women to discuss things like mental health, sex, and social media. Gurls Talk began as an Instagram account in 2015, encouraging women to share their stories. It is now grown into a much larger phenomenon, with its first festival held in 2017, another one that took place in the United States in 2018, and a third one planned in Ghana. At the festivals, talks and workshops were devoted to create “a safer space for women”<sup>31</sup> where it was possible to empower girls “to challenge the social norm”.<sup>32</sup>



Gurls Talk Co-founder and model-activist Adwoa Aboah attends the Gurls Talk Festival in collaboration with Coach and Teen Vogue at Industry City, 2018.  
By Andrew Toth/Getty Images.

<sup>30</sup> Dan Thawley, in <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/opinion/female-photographers-harley-weir-petra-collins-coco-capitan-amanda-charchian-charlotte-wales-gia-coppola>

<sup>31</sup> Hannah Moore, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/40482108/gurls-talk-adwoa-aboah-on-creating-a-safe-space-for-women>

<sup>32</sup> Isabel Ashton, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2018/03/gurls-talk-adwoa-aboah>



Gurls Talk is now a website where women can freely and safely discuss the problems they face and where they can give useful advice to others in similar situations. Gurl Talks also organises an intense program of talks in schools, podcasts, and it maintains a strong presence on the most important social media platforms.

Thanks to the work of so many women working in different fields, the exact nature of the “female gaze” is today at the centre of an intense debate. The last two years have seen the publications of many books and articles on the topic, as well as the appearance of new sites dedicated to the work of female photographers and image-makers.

### The Female gaze today

#Girlgaze is one of these. A digital media company that promotes and highlights up-and-coming young female photographers and directors, it was founded by Amanda de Cadenet in 2016. Its mission is to work with influential females in the industry, including fashion photographer Inez van Lamsweerde, photojournalist Lynsey Addario and filmmaker and photographer Sam Taylor-Johnson, to elevate females in the industry.

At the opening of 2019 #Girlgaze has 4 million Instagram followers. It organises exhibitions and has published two books: *It's Messy* and *#girlgaze*.

As already discussed, a book entirely dedicated to the “female gaze” was published in 2017. *Girl on Girl* by Charlotte Jansen deliberately re-appropriates in its title a term derived from porn, which is a typical product of the male gaze. In the book however it is used with the intent to show how women are taking back control of their images from the objectifying perspective that has existed throughout history but was only named by film critic Laura Mulvey, in 1973.

Analysing the work of 40 photographers, Jansen is firm in pointing out that ‘female gaze’ is not just a liberally applied term for a female photographer. “It is not a question of gender or sexuality. It’s a whole new way of seeing the world, differently to the rigid, vertical male gaze that dominates”.<sup>33</sup>

She equally stresses that new technologies and media have been significant to the development of female narratives, “because they have given women the chance to control their images like never before – and to publish them (and earn from them) independently. You don’t have to wait anymore to get your work noticed”.<sup>34</sup>

According to Jansen, “the fact that more women are now taking pictures of themselves than ever before, and that we are being exposed to those images in fashion, advertising, art and photojournalism, is very significant. The female gaze

<sup>33</sup> Vanessa Hsieh, A comprehensive guide to girl on girl photography, <http://www.dazed-digital.com/photography/article/35505/1/a-comprehensive-guide-to-girl-on-girl-photography>

<sup>34</sup> *ibidem*



was originally introduced by feminist theorists looking at cinema, but now it has a broader impact, thanks to a generation of artists, photo editors and writers who have been pushing for the idea of the female gaze to be explored".<sup>35</sup>

Also in 2017, *Mfon: Women Photographers of the African Diaspora* was published. The book features 100 women photographers of African descent across the diaspora and is the project of three women: documentary photographer Laylah Amatullah Barrayn; visual artist, Adama Delphine Fawundu; and producer Crystal Whaley.

Through *Mfon*, they seek to fill a void and create a powerful collective of underrepresented women photographers, journalists and scholars. *MFON* is named in memory of Mmekutmfon 'Mfon' Essien, a photographer who died from breast cancer aged 34 in 2001. The commitment is to works by underrated but very powerful female photographers, and to establishing and representing a collective voice of women photographers of African descent.



Nydia Blas, from the series *The Girls Who Spun Gold*, Ithaca, New York, 2016

<sup>35</sup> Charlotte Jansen, *Girl on Girl: the female photographers pioneering the new female gaze*, <https://www.itsnicethat.com/news/charlotte-jansen-girl-on-girl-female-gaze-photography-opinion-040417>

In 2018 the exhibition *Future Feminine* took place at Fahey/Klein Gallery in Los Angeles. The exhibition explored the “female perspective in an otherwise male-dominated medium and the way the artists incorporate the evolving female gaze in an increasingly volatile time”<sup>36</sup>. Artists included were Amanda Charchian, Remy Holwick, creative Australian duo Honey Long & Prue Stent, and Magdalena Wosinska.



Prue Stent and Honey Long, *Amoeba*, 2015

June 2018 saw the launch of the photography platform *Photographing The Female*, at <https://photographingthefemale.com>.

Founded by Danish photographer and writer Sarah Høilund, it has the ambition to “promote, produce, and share powerful stories and perspectives from all over to help the world understand how diverse, complex, and extraordinary the female experience is”.<sup>37</sup> Charlotte Jansen is a guest curator and the site offers a worldwide outlook on the work of female image makers.

It must be noted that not everybody concurs on the nature of the “female gaze” movement. British author and photography curator Susan Bright for exam-

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.faheykleingallery.com/exhibitions/future-feminine>

<sup>37</sup> Chiara Bardelli Nonino, *Photographing the Female*, <https://www.vogue.it/fotografia/fotografi-emergenti/2018/06/07/photographing-the-female-by-sarah-hoilund>

ple has stated to be “wary of assumptions depending on gender. They don’t seem as rigorous or needed as arguments and thoughts on a ‘black gaze’ or a ‘queer gaze.’ I think these are things to be discussed, problematised and questioned, as they may have more legitimacy considering the white male gaze has been the norm for so long that any alternative must be taken note of. I think women are just as capable of a typically ‘male gaze’ (especially Ellen Von Unwerth, Lee Miller or Diane Arbus, to think historically) and vice versa. To suggest they are softer, more sensitive, more ‘feminine’ is totally essentialist”.<sup>38</sup>



Monique Jacques, Girls watch the sun set at the harbor in Gaza City,  
from <https://photographingthefemale.com>.

If we stay with Jansen’s definition though, it is clear that the “female gaze” is not just about what the work speaks about, but rather it is the way that the work is created: “It’s the whole system, the whole structure of presenting and sharing images”.<sup>39</sup> As Jansen states, with “the current position of women as it is, we actually need fewer debates about what feminism is and need to work more forcefully and more wilfully towards being understood clearly. We want to be accepted, seen and treated equally”.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Dan Thawley, in <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/opinion/female-photographers-harley-weir-petra-collins-coco-capitan-amanda-charchian-charlotte-wales-gia-coppola>

<sup>39</sup> Anika Meier, Selfies Can be Feminist - In Conversation with Charlotte Jansen, <https://www.widewalls.ch/charlotte-jansen-interview/>

<sup>40</sup> *ibidem*



Nakeya Brown, from <https://photographingthefemale.com>

To conclude, the “female gaze” represents a powerful way of building images. Female photographers have worked since the very inception of photography, from pioneers Anna Atkins (British, 1799-1871) and Claude Cahun (French, 1894-1954) to today. Many have been active in all of photography’s fields, including front line reporting, like German Gerda Taro (1910-1937, killed in the Spanish Civil War), Italian Letizia Battaglia (born 1935) and Americans Dickey Chapelle (1919-1965, killed in Vietnam) and Lynsey Addario (born 1973).

Many others have developed a specific female gaze in their artistic work, like Irish Hannah Starkey, even without initially having a clearly feminist perspective.

‘When I first started out, photography was very male and not really considered art,’ she has said<sup>41</sup>. ‘I didn’t set out to have a feminist agenda, it was more that my interest in making work about women comes from the simple fact that I am one. That commonality of experience is at the heart of what I do as an artist’.

Women artists however have been excluded from the canon and the work of female photographers has not been given the attention it deserves. Now the situation has changed. As Starkey has said, now “it just feels like things are opening up because so many young women are expressing themselves through photography”.<sup>42</sup>



‘Pussy power’, Women’s March, London 2017, by Hannah Starkey

The young women photographers working today are pushing new ideas and reimagining the emancipatory potential of feminism. They are working around the question of how gender politics must be reconfigured in a world that is being transformed by automation, globalization and the digital revolution. And these ideas are at the core of one of the most exciting intellectual trends in contemporary culture, Xenofeminism.

Xenofeminism was the subject of a visionary online manifesto published in 2015 by the collective ‘Laboria Cuboniks’. “Xenofeminism: Politics for Alien-

<sup>41</sup> Sean O’Hagan, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/dec/08/hannah-starkey-photographer-interview-space-for-women-sean-ohagan>

<sup>42</sup> *ibidem*



ation”<sup>43</sup> goes beyond a call for parity between binary genders, “to anticipate a future in which differences proliferate infinitely, rendering gender decreasingly relevant as an axis of oppression – about as significant as the colour of one’s eyes”<sup>44</sup>.

In conclusion, we live today in times where our self-image as humans is constantly being remodelled.<sup>45</sup> Women photographers working with and around the female gaze are introducing different ways of looking at, seeing, and imagining bodies and identities. They are intelligent and culturally-aware women from different backgrounds and from different cultures and ethnicities that are taking risks and daring to be different. Their work and their courageous female gazes are offering us today, as Charlotte Jansen has pointed out, “a whole way of imagining the world. It is a vision of the world that is far more fluid and flexible. Perhaps that’s something that women are able to understand much more easily, but I don’t think it only relates to women and it shouldn’t be portrayed in that way. It’s a vision of a world that doesn’t yet exist but that could exist in the future”<sup>46</sup>.



Pixy Liao, Self Portrait.

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/index.html>

<sup>44</sup> Rhyan E Jones, <https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/5303/book-review-xenofeminism>

<sup>45</sup> “Alien Introspection: Xenofeminism, Robotics and Machinic Promiscuity”, <http://diannbauer.net/news/>

<sup>46</sup> Anika Meier, Selfies Can be Feminist - In Conversation with Charlotte Jansen, <https://www.widewalls.ch/charlotte-jansen-interview/>