

*Andreea CHINDRIȘ*

## THE WOMAN – A VICTIM OF BEING WATCHED?

**Abstract.** Websites, forums and online video productions are increasingly important in the social exchanges and communication of the young generation. Andreea Chindriș uses an Internet forum as a reference for her research, meant to describe the visual connections in an electronic environment where pornographic messaging and depiction of women are based on the victim-aggressor association. Using Laura Mulvey as a theoretical guide, the author describes the impact of notions like anonymity, voyeurism on the portrayal of women as victims. Following the imaginary connection between cinema and daily representations, the paper uses examples from film productions and looks for the consequences of their implantation into the the virtual reality of Internet forums.

The current paper shows that *watching* and *being watched* do not necessarily suggest an association like aggressor – victim; the two are interrelated and codependent, especially when it comes to voyeurism and exhibitionism. They are so closely connected that we cannot conceive the exhibitionist that wouldn't "unveil" in front of a voyeur, meaning they depend on each other. Our working environment is the Internet, [4chan.org](http://4chan.org) to be more specific, a forum where almost no rules seem to apply and where pornography seems mandatory.

The forum users exchange images, websites, links to videos; when a female user posts a photo of herself, it causes waves of anger and requests, because the other users want to see that person naked. So the question at the base of this article would be: are the girls that post pictures of themselves victims?

When it comes to the Internet, these two types of action can occur with the purpose of "meeting" the other, having a closer look, despite the low quality of the

web cam, that can show foggy images. It may happen that the web cam gets out of your control, in the sense that the image can be distorted.

The Internet is the place where people want to expose themselves in order to cause a reaction. There is no other medium that can collect so many reactions in such a short time. Most websites have a forum section or give visitors the possibility to post comments. A book seems like a closed medium nowadays, as reactions may appear quite late; when that happens, it is most probably on the Internet.

In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey speaks about cinema in these terms: “The cinema poses questions of ways the unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking”<sup>1</sup> So the pleasure of looking is reserved for men, while women are those being analyzed. Looking at a person longer equals subduing that person into your fantasy, because the watcher has the greater force. Is that really true?

The girls from [4chan.org](http://4chan.org) want to have the power from the position of the sexual thing, not afraid that the fact of being considered a fetish object may constitute a

source of self esteem. Pornographic chats already exist on the forum, nobody hides anything, everybody asks for more. When a girl posts a picture of herself, asking the boys to tell her what to do next, indecent replies should be expected, encouraging her to post the next picture naked.

“One respondent to my questionnaire wrote that the pleasure is a response to ‘combinations of power and desire.’”<sup>2</sup> Both sides have the feeding of power: those who expose themselves do it in order to have control over the situation, while those who look at the pictures can also feel they are the ones manipulating. The idea that the girls on this website are victims is a wrong premise: from the first visit on the website, any user understands that the content will be treated in a racist, xenophobe or misogynist manner.

Mulvey’s paper led to many other papers, among which I would like to mention Eva Maria Jacobsson (*A Female Gaze*), who wonders whether the woman can be the one watching the man. She analyzes a film, showing that the woman is in power, that it is possible for her to lead the action and, furthermore, she can be the one watching. „To indentify with a female gaze could be a mere cross identification with masculinity.”<sup>3</sup>

1 Laura Mulvey, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, in Screen 16:3 autumn 1975 [www.scribd.com/.../laura-mulvey-visual-pleasure-and-narrative-cinema](http://www.scribd.com/.../laura-mulvey-visual-pleasure-and-narrative-cinema) -.

2 Jenny Barrett, You’ve Made Mistress Very, Very Angry: Displeasure and Pleasure in Media Representations of BDSM’, *Particip@tions* Volume 4, Issue 1 (May 2007).

3 Eva Maria Jacobsson, *A Female Gaze*, Kungl Tekniska Hogskolan, CID, Stockholm, Sweden, 1999, p. 1.

Although she shows that this is a viable option, the man should remain in the position of the watcher, as this action has masculine traits.

But what does “to gaze” mean? The term refers to the way that someone looks at an object or at another person; in feminist theories, the term refers strictly to the-man-watching-the-woman. If the reverse situation occurs, the woman is blamed of masculinity, as she enters man’s territory and takes over some of his traits.

Another study shows images of men and women being photographed in the same pose. The result is that men posing like women are most likely considered funny, like something would be truly wrong with the picture. The study<sup>4</sup> concludes that, in the Western countries at least, it is natural for two women to do something that would become completely unnatural if applied to two men. I would say that this happens because people are most accustomed to women being the strong characters in commercials. Men are more seldom subjects of this area, thus giving the impression that the poses would be proper for female models only.

On [4chan.org](http://4chan.org) forum, the girls that post pictures try to convince the others how attractive they are. There is a tendency to distort reality, especially because most

pictures are taken as the girls look into the mirror (for a better frame but also for them to see what they look like in the picture).

“The extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates spectators from one another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation.”<sup>5</sup> This is also the case of the Internet, which uses the screen to separate what is being revealed by those who watch it, hidden in their rooms. I would say that the degree of intimacy is higher in the case of the Internet, because, unlike the movie theatre, the room is not filled with strangers. This is where the greater courage comes from, the liberty of being more harsh and mean with what you see in your own room, as you are your own master in that secure space. While, in the theatre, sharing an image with the rest of the audience may cause discomfort, the Internet offers the greatest amount of anonymity. About the youth: “Overall, 72% have their own rooms and need not share with a sibling. Thus for many children and young people, the bedroom also provides a well-equipped opportunity for media use, away from intrusion or regulation by parents or siblings.”<sup>6</sup>

4 Thomas Streeter, Nicole Hintlian, Samantha Chipetz, and Susanna Callender, *A Web Essay on the Male Gaze, Fashion Advertising, and the Pose*, <http://www.uvm.edu/~tstreete/powerpose/index.html>.

5 Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, in *Screen* 16:3 autumn 1975 [www.scribd.com/.../laura-mulvey-visual-pleasure-and-narrative-cinema](http://www.scribd.com/.../laura-mulvey-visual-pleasure-and-narrative-cinema).

6 Sonia Livingstone, Moira Bovill, *Young People, New Media*, [www.lse.ac.uk/](http://www.lse.ac.uk/)

The [4chan](#) forum has a strong policy in what concerns anonymity: “Anonymous is the name assigned to a poster who does not enter text in to the [Name] field. Anonymous is not a single person, but rather represents the collective whole of [4chan](#). He is a god amongst men.”<sup>7</sup> Doubling this coordinate of television, which already implies an exhibitionist-voyeur type of relation, pornographic films and websites count on the presence of someone, behind the screen, having a fantasy or a sexual desire.

The rules of the forum are especially made so that the users can speak their mind without being afraid that they might be discovered. This brings out a lot of honesty but also harshness.

“In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.”<sup>8</sup> The best example to support Mulvey’s theory is the striptease show or the cabaret – where the body of a woman is the watched object. The woman is the “victim”, the sexual object, without any chance to protest. What if, during a striptease show, the woman would drag a man on stage? It would all turn into a comic show. Out of his protective environment, out of the darkness of the audience, the man can no longer make use of his power, as his fantasy is destroyed.

It would seem that the woman is leading the game; when she is on stage, analyzed and watched, she is weaker, as she is only a sexual thing; but if she can overcome this level of shame, she can become the common fantasy of the entire audience and can wield upon the men.

Nevertheless, I noticed that on the [4chan.org](#) forum, girls chose this rather masochistic approach, only because they are not afraid of the potential critics they might receive. Strength and desire – these are the two experiences that one of Barret’s subjects mentions; as long as you are the master of your own body, you feel stronger. Feminist theories disagree that this situation would give the woman any power. They stand to the idea that the woman is fragile, at the hand of man; men are those trying to convince the girls to post naked pictures of themselves on the forum. I can see a reversed situation here: the man asks the woman to show more – isn’t she the one in control? She doesn’t take her clothes off because she must do so, or because she is paid for it – she does it because she wants to. The man is in the dark, the woman is on stage: isn’t this a sign of strength? The great stake is to remain the focus of attention for as long as possible, before the viewers move their attention upon the next image of a girl.

“Cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One of them is scopophilia.”<sup>9</sup>

---

collections/media@lse/pdf/young\_people\_report.pdf, London 2000, p. 33.

7 [4chan.org/rules](#)

8 Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, in *Screen* 16:3 autumn 1975

---

[www.scribd.com/.../laura-mulvey-visual-pleasure-and-narrative-cinema](http://www.scribd.com/.../laura-mulvey-visual-pleasure-and-narrative-cinema).

9 *Ibid.*

The term refers to the pleasure of watching. Mulvey speaks of this pleasure and about identification with the image on the screen, a purely narcissistic identification (not related to a sexual pleasure, but rather the narcissistic impulse of identifying yourself with one on the screen). We can't tell for sure if the girls from [4chan.org](http://4chan.org) belong to one category or to another: masochism or narcissism. I think that both variants can speak of this phenomenon: the desire to be seen as a sexual object, as well as the desire to be admired.

The director of *Fatal Attraction*, the film that Eva Maria Jacobsson analyzes from the point of view of changing the watched object (from woman to man), says that: "They are sort of pretending or trying to be men, sort of overcompensating for not being men."<sup>10</sup> He also mentions that feminists no longer speak about the oppression of women; on the contrary, "Women talk about fucking men rather

than being fucked."<sup>11</sup> So if someone would ask the girls why they would expose themselves on a forum where they get criticized and are asked to take more clothes off, they might answer that they are the ones in control, having the power. After all, who is the one in power? The one that has a fantasy or the one that makes it happen, this being a fantasy in itself? Our image as individuals is not taken from our positioning outside of society or our comparison to something distant and exterior; it is taken from the others' reaction towards us. Everyone needs to know that they are liked. Photography is a way of asking for a reaction: the need for confirmation, or the need to settle where one stands from that point of view; this means that it is the others that stabilize our self esteem. Although this may seem like a sign of weakness, we need to see ourselves through the eyes of another in order establish our own self image.

### Bibliography:

1. Barrett, J., *You've Made Mistress Very, Very Angry: Displeasure and Pleasure in Media Representations of BDSM*, Particip@tions Volume 4, Issue 1 (May 2007).
2. Jacobsson, E. M., *A Female Gaze*, Kungl Tekniska Hogskolan, CID, Stockholm, Sweden, 1999.
3. Livingstone, S., Bovill, M., *Young People, New Media*, [www.lse.ac.uk/collections/media@lse/pdf/young\\_people\\_report.pdf](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/media@lse/pdf/young_people_report.pdf), London 2000.
4. Mulvey, L., *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Screen 16:3 autumn 1975 [www.scribd.com/.../laura-mulvey-visual-pleasure-and-narrative-cinema](http://www.scribd.com/.../laura-mulvey-visual-pleasure-and-narrative-cinema) -
5. Streeter, T., Hintlia, N., Chipetz, S., and Callender, S., *A Web Essay on the Male Gaze, Fashion Advertising, and the Pose*, <http://www.uvm.edu/~tstreete/powerpose/index.html>
- 6 [4chan.org](http://4chan.org)

---

10 Adrian Lyne in Eva Maria Jacobsson, *A Female Gaze*, Kungl Tekniska Hogskolan, CID, Stockholm, Sweden, 1999, p. 23.

---

11 *Ibid.*