

Lauryn-Ashley Solomon

Piya Lapinski

English 6070

15 December 2021

Reclaiming the Perspective: Exploring the Gaze in HBO's series *Insecure*

Laura Mulvey's essay titled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" aims to expose the patriarchal methods that have structured films both consciously and unconsciously. The essay examines how historic Hollywood films display pleasure in the relationships between men and women. Mulvey highlights how male-centric Hollywood films can be and the idea that women only exist in these films as objects of pleasure for men. In addition, due to the camera angles and film techniques, the women ultimately become objects of pleasure for the viewers too. In her essay, Mulvey states, "The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extradiegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle" (Mulvey 2187). Whomever the producers pick for the viewers to watch will be on display in an objectifying way. Mulvey's theories also allow the viewer to take responsibility because by simply watching, the viewer experiences the male gaze since the film is shown through the male perspective. Throughout the essay, Mulvey challenges psychoanalytic theorists such as Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud. Many of their theories, such as the castration complex and the mirror stage are explored. Ultimately, Mulvey wants a more feministic approach to be considered in these films and for female characters to have a more active role. Mulvey's essay focuses heavily on the dynamic of pleasure

between white men and white women, therefore it leaves plenty of other individuals and forms of relationships who do not fall within those categories out of the entire conversation. Hollywood cinema has evolved to include a wide range of diverse personalities, cultural backgrounds, and relationship styles to relate and identify with audiences of all kinds. Because Hollywood movies do not just represent white men in their pursuit of white women anymore, many of Mulvey's arguments are outdated. While she makes an effort to demonstrate why women should have more active roles and not be simplified to objects, she leaves several people out of the conversation, including women of color.

Insecure, a five-season series on HBO, starring and directed by Issa Rae, follows the life of a Black female character named Issa Dee. The character Issa is a modern-day 29-year-old going through life in Los Angeles with her female best friend, Molly. The show explores the awkward experiences of the characters through their friendship, romantic relationships, professional life, and more. Issa navigates through life as a character who doesn't feel confident or comfortable in her work life or her relationship with her boyfriend. Throughout the first season, she struggles in her relationship as the "bread-winner," cheats on her boyfriend, and they break up after being together for many years. After the breakup, Issa begins casually dating other men. At the same time, her friend Molly continues to date men in hopes of finding one that will propose to her, but it never works out. For both women, the men they date never produce successful relationships. Through their many relationships, Issa and Molly pursue what they want, try to navigate through the insecurities in every facet of their lives, and embark on a journey to reach their own versions of success.

While there are many topics covered throughout *Insecure*, especially ones related to Blackness and race in America, one of the most significant ideas is women's sexuality and freedom in today's culture. Rhonda Richford, a writer from *The Hollywood Reporter*, stated in an interview with Issa Rae that the show is meant to be "frank and raw, and challenge the stereotype of the hypersexual black woman and flip the traditional male gaze" (Richford). In many of the sex scenes that appear in the majority of *Insecure* episodes, the visual focus shifts from the traditional views of the female body onto the male body. In the *Hollywood Reporter* interview, Rae notes that the rawness of the sexuality and nudity of men is intentional because everyone is all too familiar with seeing nude women on screen. She states, "But there's this specific male gaze that we've always been subjected to and this is an opportunity to reverse that" (Richford). *Insecure* aims to shift the power of the gaze from men to women. Throughout the entire *Insecure* series, which is shown through the lens of the main Black female characters, men play a more passive role while women take on the more dominant role, inevitably reclaiming the gaze.

Scopophilia

In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey introduces the idea of scopophilia (pleasure in looking). She compares it to Freud's theory of gazing at people as objects. In Freud's theory, the idea of scopophilia was related to children and the castration complex. Their gaze stemmed from curiosity about private areas that they couldn't see. According to Mulvey, scopophilia is present in many Hollywood films, and women are the object of the looking that men gain pleasure from. Many of the male characters in traditional Hollywood films are fixated on a beautiful, blonde, white

woman. The way they gaze at the woman makes it clear that there is an element of attraction towards them. Unfortunately for the women, they don't have very prominent roles in the films, except to be the object or recipient of the gaze. Not only are the women the object of the gaze for men, but the audience is invited to gaze as well. Mulvey writes, "The magic of Hollywood style at its best arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure" (Mulvey 2183). Mulvey argues that Hollywood's manipulation of visual pleasure satisfies the erotic pleasure of men and gives the viewers the option to do the same. Traditional Hollywood films create a way for more than just the male characters to engage in pleasurable looking. The manipulation of visual pleasure is what draws the audience to the cinema. There are many ways that filmmakers manipulate visual pleasure. One example is when a woman enters a scene, and the camera pans her entire body from bottom to top. The viewers spend time gazing directly at the woman's body before even seeing her face. Another way that this fetishistic scopophilia comes out in films is during sex scenes. Often, the only body that can be clearly seen belongs to the woman, and rarely anything on display belongs to the man's body. With this approach, the viewers in the audience are forced to fixate their eyes on the woman's body with little focus on who she is or the role she's playing. The view that the audience experiences is typically the same view the main male character sees. When women are over-sexualized and seen through the perspective of men in traditional Hollywood films, it is not just for the benefit of the storyline, but to draw in and engage the viewers.

Through the sexual scenes prevalent in HBO's *Insecure*, the male bodies are typically the ones who are featured on camera, which is a unique approach. In an article

published by *News18*, Rae stated that the reason men are sexualized in *Insecure* is that "we are seeing this through the female lens" ("It's Time for Women to Sexualise Men"). In fact, the show has several examples of scopophilia focusing on the male characters in the show. For instance, in the show's pilot episode, Issa focuses on a male love interest through her phone on social media. She clicks one of his images, and the frame pans from his head to toe, focusing mainly on his body. In other scenes, both Issa and Molly are seen gazing at men whom they are physically attracted to and discussing whether they are going to pursue them for a date or in a relationship. The camera always pans toward the men they're focused on, and the viewers are invited to join in and gaze along with them. While Issa is still in a relationship with her boyfriend from the start of the series, a scene in episode four features them in the bathroom. Her boyfriend, Lawrence, takes a shower, and Issa gazes at him with pleasure while he's showering. During the scene, Issa is fully clothed, and the viewers can see Lawrence's body parts. As they get physically intimate in the scene, the only body parts that are exposed on camera are from Issa's boyfriend, Lawrence. Rae makes it clear very early on in the series that men will be featured as the object to be looked at, not women. In addition, the way that Issa and Molly are portrayed in *Insecure* does not align with the typical "sexy woman" persona cast in movies just for men to stare at. The women in the show are awkward and trying to figure out who they are and who they want to be perceived as. With this, the show sometimes shows them doing things that aren't the most attractive in their pursuit of men. In season two, Issa begins casually dating lots of men in what she calls her "hoe phase." As she begins to approach one man that she's interested in, Issa begins stumbling awkwardly and moving uncomfortably towards him.

As she walks, she states, "This is my sexy walk." This comedic scene highlights that Issa and Molly are not the objects of the gaze, but they are the ones doing the gazing. As Black, awkward female owners of the gaze, the characters in *Insecure* are complete opposites of the owners of the gaze that Mulvey describes. Throughout the series, it is rare that male characters are caught gazing at the women or approaching them without a woman making a move first. The show provides a modern-day example of scopophilia from the perspective of women.

Insecure aims to redefine what it means for a woman to gaze. This is important because there were times when women were not allowed to possess the power of the gaze. In her essay "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," Mary Ann Doane describes how in traditional Hollywood films, women were often punished for possessing the power of the gaze. She describes Linda Williams's findings of women being punished for the gaze in horror films. When the woman's gaze is shown in horror films, she states, "What she sees, the monster, is only a mirror of herself - both woman and monster are freakish in their difference - defined by either too much or too little" (Doane 83). Doane goes on to describe the female characters' gaze in movies such as *Humoresque*, *Leave Her to Heaven*, and *Beyond the Forest*, which all end up negatively affecting the women. In each of the stories, the female characters have an active role as a spectator, yet they still end up dead. Even when traditional Hollywood films allow the female characters to gaze, it was only held momentarily, and in many cases, the characters could not live for the entire duration of the film because of it.

Mirror Stage

In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey discusses another approach to scopophilia—narcissism. This type of scopophilia is different from the fetishistic version, and it looks inward at an individual's ego. Jacques Lacan compares it to the moment that a child recognizes their image in a mirror. Lacan argues that this is crucial for the "constitution of the ego" (Mulvey 2185). When a child sees their reflection, they get happy and excited because the reflected image appears to be a better version of themselves, so they can identify with it. In film, this form of scopophilia arises when viewers see someone they can identify with on the screen. Mulvey states, "As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence" (Mulvey 2187). If the main character is a put-together, good-looking person that the audience members can relate to, it helps build up their ego. In many traditional Hollywood films, the main character was a professional, attractive gentleman most women would be attracted to. The white male directors and producers know that the viewers in the audience would likely want to identify with the characters to build their ego, so they must include them in the films. Most of the viewers will identify with the male character, and as a result, develop an attraction to the female character because of the theory of the mirror stage.

One of the unique aspects of *Insecure* is that the main character, Issa, constantly has side conversations with herself in front of a bathroom mirror. Sometimes, Issa holds an entire conversation with the mirror version of herself to seek advice or brainstorm how she'll get out of a situation. At other times, she practices her original raps that

describe her upcoming plans or simply releases her thoughts in front of the mirror.

Regardless of what she's saying or about to do, she stands in front of the mirror, stares at her reflection, and has a discussion with herself about it. In an interview with Estelle Tang from *Elle Magazine*, Rae shares that she uses her reflection in the mirror to express her thoughts because "the bathroom is where you are most vulnerable, where you're either naked or looking at yourself in the mirror" (Tang). Issa's literal "mirror stage" contrasts Lacan's mirror stage because in her version, she is her raw and unfiltered self. She uses the mirror to look inward and dig deep to come up with a conclusion on whatever situation she finds herself in, whether big or small. What's unique about Issa's perspective in the mirror is that she doesn't look at her reflection as a better version of herself; instead, seeing it makes her more confident in who she already is. For Issa, looking in the mirror allows her to explore her options and dig deeper into herself to make decisions. As watchers, the audience gets a visual glimpse into Issa's thought process along with a realistic visual aid. In Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, the perception in the mirror creates a larger ego for the subject. However, in *Insecure*, when Issa stares at the mirror, it builds her ego after she takes the time to talk through the situation. Issa and Molly are not like the characters that "do the looking" who Mulvey references in her essay. Issa is not the most confident, most attractive, or most secure person, and she doesn't have a very big ego. But, when Issa takes the time to look in the mirror and talk with herself, she gains the confidence that she needs to go out and own the gaze.

The Male Gaze

In traditional Hollywood films, the female characters were looked at as the object of the gaze only. Throughout the films, men projected their sexual fantasies onto them. Mulvey describes the female characters as "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 2186). The women simply were there to be viewed by the male characters and the audience. In chapter three of Mulvey's essay titled "Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look," she describes the roles of men and women as split between active-male and passive-female. With this approach, the male in traditional Hollywood films is the doer. His actions are critical parts of the storyline. If he is removed from the storyline, it would drastically alter the story. However, the women in traditional Hollywood films do not have a significant role or part to play. Their role cannot exist without a man who is interested in them sexually. In contrast to the male role, if the woman's character were removed, it would not make any difference to the actual storyline or plot. In these traditional movies, the women are symbols of attraction. They look almost perfect, and their beauty helps them hold the gaze of the main male character and the viewers. Even when the female character is glamorous and independent and appears to operate on her own without needing the male character to control her, the narrative of the story eventually changes, and she loses her independence. In an example provided by Mulvey titled *Only Angels Have Wings*, the female character begins as the spectator of the male. While she is fully independent and beautiful, the male character pursues her, and she falls in love with him, and then her identity becomes part of his in the story. Mulvey describes it as "her eroticism is subjected to the male star alone" (Mulvey 2188). Although she possessed her own power in the beginning, now the male character holds her power, and the audience can possess it as well. No matter how strong and powerful

the female character begins, the gaze of the male character and the audience can ultimately overpower her in traditional Hollywood films.

Mulvey mentions three Hitchcock films as examples of the male gaze in her essay—*Rear Window*, *Marnie*, and *Vertigo*. In each film, the gaze is a central part of the story. She notes in her essay, "the look is central to the plot, oscillating between voyeurism and fetishistic fascination" (Mulvey 2190). In the Hitchcock movies she highlights, the main male character holds the power since he is the owner of the gaze. With the power that they hold, the men ultimately take control of the woman and view her as an object. In the films, the male character is literally shown looking or staring at a woman or gazing across a room or outside of a window. Then the camera shows the audience what the man can see, allowing the audience to be a part of the gaze as well. In that viewpoint, what is shown is often a beautiful image of a woman. *In Rear Window*, the main male character stares out of his window into other apartments across the yard. Throughout the film, he is constantly fixated on something specific. He uses a lens to stare at his neighbors, and they don't know that he is gazing at them. He invades their privacy by watching what they do, and the audience gets to witness it from the same viewpoint. In her essay titled "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," Doane states, "Spectatorial desire, in contemporary film theory, is generally delineated as either voyeurism or fetishism, as precisely a pleasure in seeing what is prohibited in relation to the female body. The image orchestrates a gaze" (Doane 76). Doane's idea that the spectator's desire is due to the pleasure in seeing what is prohibited relates to Freud's castration complex theory. In Freud's theory, the woman believes she lacks a penis because she has been castrated. Mulvey believes that

because of this, the male characters have anxiety toward the female characters because they fear that the same thing will happen to them.

Filmmakers possess the control over how a movie is displayed and the angles they want to be represented. Mary Ann Doane notes in her essay, "The woman's beauty, her very desirability, becomes a function of certain practices of imaging - framing, lighting, camera movement, angle" (Doane 76). In Hitchcock's films and many other traditional Hollywood movies, the editing and narrative are entirely controlled and made to create a gaze, whether the viewers want to participate in it or not. Mulvey believes that these structures and methods for creating a gaze that the audience experiences along with the male characters must be broken down. She breaks down the three methods of "looking" that are associated with traditional Hollywood films. First, the camera gazes at the actors. Second, the audience gazes at the characters on screen. Third, the male characters gaze at the women. The gaze can be deconstructed, beginning with the breakdown of these three aspects. By eliminating the male gaze in films, women would not be subjected to passive roles only. In the films that Mulvey described, the women were always used as an object and lacked much of a storyline apart from the male characters. Today, more women are taking center stage on the screen. Not only are they playing a more active role, but they are taking back the power of the gaze.

The Female Gaze

In *Insecure*, the female gaze is prevalent throughout the entire series. During an interview, Rae explains that in creating the show, "it's time for the female gaze to have its day" ("It's Time for Women to Sexualise Men"). Viewers witness the female gaze

through Issa and Molly's relationships with men. It is clear that Issa and Molly possess the power of the gaze in the episodes. In *Insecure*, the male characters have their own storylines, but they mainly exist in the world of the female characters. A popular concept known as the Bechdel Test could be applied to what Issa Rae accomplishes with the storyline of *Insecure*. The Bechdel Test is a way to determine whether or not women in films or TV shows have substantial roles outside of the male characters. It is tested by examining the conversations that women in the story have with each other since women's speaking roles have historically been limited and comparably much less than men. In addition, their conversations were often focused on the men in the story. In the essay titled "The Bechdel Test and the Social Form of Character Networks," author Scott Selisker describes the impact that the character's conversations can have on a story. He notes that passing the Bechdel Test requires films to meet three criteria, "One it has to have at least two women in it who, two, talk to each other about, three, something besides a man" (Selisker 505). *Insecure* passes the traditional Bechdel test but proves that if it were reversed, it would likely fail. Throughout the series, most of the male characters rarely ever have scenes with each other unless it is related to their romantic interests in the female characters. Rae doesn't let the men hold the power of the script or the gaze. Rae likely created this dynamic intentionally to further show the series through the perspective of the female characters and highlight the female gaze.

The most significant difference in *Insecure* compared to old Hollywood films is that not only is *Insecure* focused on women, but specifically on Black women. This provides a relatively new perspective to the screen that is often ignored. In the past, most directors were white men, so the active character in the film was typically depicted

as a reflection of themselves. However, today's directors and film crews look much different. Writers' rooms and production teams contain people of color, so they have the power to write the narrative of their choice, and that's what is happening. Rae is not only using *Insecure* to prove that women can be the owner of the gaze through bold sexuality and independent characters, but she is also transforming the common perception of Black women on television. This is important because Black women were not only completely absent from many storylines in traditional Hollywood films, but they were also heavily left out of the conversation of early feminist film writers, such as Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

Problems with Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"

In "The Oppositional Gaze," Bell Hooks asks the question, "Why is it that feminist film criticism, which has most claimed the terrain of woman's identity, representation, and subjectivity as its field of analysis, remains aggressively silent on the subject of blackness?" (Hooks 124). Hooks goes on to add that not only are these film critics silent on the subject of blackness but specifically on the subject of "black womanhood." It's obvious that many feminist film critics dismissed the experience of Black women as they developed their theories, ultimately contributing to a more significant problem. Black women are completely absent from the narrative of traditional Hollywood films. In Lorraine O'Grady's essay titled "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," she states, "But it is the African female, who, by virtue of color and feature and the extreme metaphors of enslavement, is at the outermost reaches of 'otherness'" (O'Grady). Feminist film critics tend to generally speak about women when it comes to traditional Hollywood films, but Black women are not part of that conversation. In her

essay titled "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," Bell Hooks recalls that many women that she has spoken with were "adamant that they never went to movies expecting to see compelling representations of black femaleness" (Hooks 119). It's important for film critics to acknowledge the lack of diverse women in traditional Hollywood films in order to accurately develop their theories and represent all women. In "Olympia's Maid," O'Grady notes, "Thus only the white body remains as the object of a voyeuristic, fetishizing male gaze" (O'Grady). She believes that this is the case because oftentimes, Black women were hidden in films and didn't fit into the narrative of the male gaze that feminist film critics describe. O'Grady recalls her experience as a swimmer using communal showers at public swimming pools. She describes the scene of Black women and girls showering with their bathing suits on while the white women wore nothing. She notes that this difference in comfortability in front of others could be related to the perception of Black women in the media or the lack thereof. She states, "Perhaps they have internalized and are cooperating with the West's construction of not-white women as not-to-be-seen" (O'Grady). Removing the images of specific groups from film creates damaging impacts. It's important for all people to be represented in Hollywood films and on the TV screen with the help of diverse film directors. Regarding traditional Hollywood films, Hooks notes that "Black female spectators have had to develop looking relations... that constructs our presence as absence... to perpetuate white supremacy and with it a phallogentric spectatorship where the woman to be looked at is white" (Hooks 118). One of the main issues with Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is that in her arguments for women, the only ones that she is really making a case for are white. Hooks notes, "Feminist film theory rooted in a

historical psychoanalytic framework that privileges sexual difference actively suppresses recognition of race, reenacting and mirroring the erasure of black womanhood that occurs in films, silencing any discussion of racial difference—of racialized sexual difference” (Hooks 123). Although some feminist film critics try to speak about all women, many of their ideas do not actually apply to the Black female experience.

When feminist film critics specifically discuss the male gaze in terms of traditional Hollywood films, they tend to leave Black men completely out of the conversation too. In “Black Looks: Race and Representation,” Bell Hooks introduces the term “oppositional gaze.” The oppositional gaze stems from a time in America when Black people were punished for looking at their white slave owners. Hooks states, “The gaze has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally” (Hooks 116). Preventing Black people from “looking” or gazing has been used as a punishment for many years since slavery. Hooks describes how during the Civil Rights Movement, Black men were often punished or killed for simply looking at a white woman. Hooks notes, “When most black people in the United States first had the opportunity to look at film and television, they did so fully aware that mass media was a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy” (Hooks 117). In Hooks’ theory of the oppositional gaze, her ideas involve the political rebellion against the repression of a Black person’s gaze or right to look both on-screen and off-screen. Hooks points out how the gaze of the Black male as a spectator watching the film is entirely different from the gaze of white males or even Black women. She writes, “As spectators, black men could repudiate the reproduction of racism in cinema and television... they were rebelling

against white supremacy by daring to look, by engaging phallogentric politics of spectatorship” (Hooks 118). When Black men attended the movies to see traditional Hollywood films, they could take part in the gaze without being punished for it. Hooks stated, “To stare at the television, or mainstream movies, to engage its images, was to engage its negation of black representation” (Hooks 117). Through the gaze of a spectator, they were able to feel what it was like to rebel against the standards of what they were allowed to do in society at that time. Hooks states, “In their role as spectators, Black men could enter an imaginative space of phallogentric power that mediated racial negation” (Hooks 118). Hooks challenges many writers in their theories that contribute to the erasure of Black people, urging them to be more inclusive. The experiences of Black women and men are not the same as those of white people, and those differences should be acknowledged.

In Mulvey’s essay, another key group that she does not acknowledge are those who do not fit into the standard binary genders. In Judith Butler’s essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” she states how limiting Mulvey’s theory is when talking about all women but only really highlighting cis-gendered heterosexual women. Mulvey’s emphasis on the Hitchcock blonde woman and others whom the heterosexual male characters are fixated on completely disregards other types of women. Butler states that her concern with feminist theory is “that sexual difference not become a reification which unwittingly preserves a binary restriction on gender identity and an implicitly heterosexual framework for the description of gender, gender identity, and sexuality” (Butler 530). There is a need for feminist writers to discuss diverse experiences of women instead of focusing only on the

white women's experiences. Many feminist writers tend to erase the existence of non-traditional women in their theories completely.

***Insecure* and the Redefined Gaze**

Rae describes in an article by *The Hollywood Reporter* that *Insecure* is for all audiences (Richford). While the show is centered around experiences related to Black people and specifically Black women, she invites viewers of all kinds to watch and enjoy the show. In fact, according to the article, 62% of *Insecure*'s viewers are white people (Richford). Regardless of race or background, all can take part in the gaze that *Insecure* writers and directors choose to portray. However, this gaze is much different from that of traditional Hollywood films. The majority of the cast and crew of *Insecure* is Black, so the perspectives are much different. They aim to show marginalized groups on screen in a number of different ways. What *Insecure* does best is disrupt the conventional representation of Black female bodies. This is something that Hooks discusses in her "Oppositional Gaze" essay. She notes that when filmmakers deconstruct the stereotype, they "invite the audience to look differently" (Hooks 130). In contrast to Hitchcock's films, where the white male characters always have dominance over the passive female character, *Insecure* varies the perception of everyone. While the majority of times, the Black female characters hold the power in the episodes, they are not always the most confident, independent, and secure characters with whom the audience would typically want to identify with like the men in Hitchcock films. This creates an opportunity for the audience to choose to identify with the more passive characters if they desire. In *Insecure*, the more passive characters are typically the men in the story. Although the male characters are the ones that the gaze is fixated on, they are not always fully

controlled by the female characters' narrative. In *Insecure*, most of the male characters have less important roles than the women, but the main character's storylines are generally important. The difference in the female gaze of *Insecure* compared to the male gaze of traditional films is that though many of the male characters' bodies are sexualized, their characters are not objectified and limited to only their bodies or looks. Through this approach, especially considering the majority Black cast, Rae invites the audiences to take part in the gaze, but not to objectify anyone. When it comes to the female gaze, Mary Ann Doane states that if you reverse the relation of the gaze and the woman begins appropriating the gaze for her own pleasure, it reinforces the same flawed binary system. She states, "The male striptease, the gigolo - both inevitably signify the mechanism of reversal itself... [this] simply reinforces the dominant system of aligning sexual difference with a subject/object dichotomy" (Doane 77). In *Insecure*, Rae and the writers take a different approach to the gaze. Women hold the power, yet it doesn't make the men completely powerless. Rae and the writers see value in all of the characters, no matter what they do in the show. Rae is mindful of her diverse audiences and the perception that is created of them by the show. Rae does not allow the characters to be objectified on screen, so they are not inviting the audience to objectify or try to control them off-screen. In Bell Hooks' essay, she talks about the dangers of the gaze when it comes to Black people in real life (Hooks 116). Rae is mindful of these things, and in understanding the power that the gaze has on the audience, she creates a show that isn't harmful to the perception of the Black men or women who are featured. When discussing the perception of Black women in film, Hooks describes the interaction between characters Louise and Maggie from *Passion of Remembrance*. Hooks

describes how the friends get ready to go to a party, and they look at each other and then stare at themselves in mirrors. Hooks notes that “they appear completely focused on their encounter with black female-ness” (Hooks 130). She states how important it is for Black people, especially Black women, to see themselves in a positive way on screen and not just how others stare at them. In society at the time when many traditional films were created, men dominated everything, and women were just seen as fantasies. This was reflected in the films. Movie directors could have taken the opportunity to create films that changed the narrative about women and gave them more of a voice, but they chose not to. Since part of the gaze involves the audience as well, the directors of the time contributed to the negative perception of women. In Mulvey’s essay, she talks about how the gaze can be seen as truth because of how it is constructed in films (Mulvey 2192). With this approach, many people were possibly led to believe that because of how women were portrayed and treated on screen, in real life, they were meant to be objectified, fetishized, and treated in the exact same manner.

Issa Rae uses *Insecure* to share stories through a female lens, and she incorporates marginalized groups as she does it. Rae understands the power of the gaze and how it can affect audiences of all kinds. *Insecure* offers a fresh perspective on the female gaze that is inclusive of different racial backgrounds, sexual orientations, and relationship types. In comparison to Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Rae expands on Mulvey’s arguments and displays how objectifying and discriminatory the traditional male gaze is while showcasing the true power of the female gaze and keeping diversity at the forefront.

Works Cited

- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal (Washington, D.C.)*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, pp. 519–531. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>.
- Doane, Mary Ann. "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator." *Screen*, vol. 23, no. 3-4, 1982, pp. 74–88. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/23.3-4.74>.
- Hooks, Bell. "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 1992, pp. 115–131.
- "It's Time for Women to Sexualise Men, Says TV Star Issa Rae." *News18*, 18 Oct. 2018, <https://www.news18.com/news/buzz/its-time-for-women-to-sexualise-men-says-tv-star-issa-rae-1912705.html>.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 2181–2192.
- O'Grady, Lorraine. "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity." 1992, https://lorraineogrady.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Lorraine-OGrady_Olympias-Maid-Reclaiming-Black-Female-Subjectivity.pdf.
- Richford, Rhonda. "MIPCOM: Honoree Issa Rae Talks Diverse Writers Rooms and the Female Gaze." *The Hollywood Reporter*, The Hollywood Reporter, 18 Oct. 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/issa-rae-talks-diversity-female-gaze-at-mipcom-1153249/>.

Selisker, Scott. "The Bechdel Test and the Social Form of Character Networks." *New Literary History*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2015, pp. 505–23,

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24542676>.

Tang, Estelle. "Issa Rae Takes Aim at the 'Old Boys' Club' of Television." *ELLE*, ELLE, 29 Nov. 2021, [https://www.elle.com/culture/movies-tv/interviews/a39920/issa-rae-](https://www.elle.com/culture/movies-tv/interviews/a39920/issa-rae-insecure-interview/)

[insecure-interview/](https://www.elle.com/culture/movies-tv/interviews/a39920/issa-rae-insecure-interview/).