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## Unveiling Subjectivity: Metamorphosing the Female Nude in the Pantheon of Art History via John Berger's "Ways of Seeing"

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### Abstract

This paper examines how men and women are represented differently in pictures and in society at large: males have agency, but women are largely involved in a perpetual project of monitoring their self-presentation rather than focusing on external duties. In his *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger famously summarizes this by noting, "Men act while women appear." This link, he observes, is particularly visible in a certain genre of European oil painting that frequently displays naked female figures. The ladies in paintings are often naked not because it makes sense for the narratives in which they are shown, but rather because their nudity is constructed by and for the (supposedly) masculine observer. Women are painted to self-consciously display their sexuality, accused of vanity through associations with symbols like mirrors and beauty products, even though women were seldom the ones behind this pictorial tradition. Rather, women looked naked for the benefit of the paintings' owners, who were their primary audience for most of history. Although pictures are more freely available now, many components of this representational legacy persist, presenting women as passive or existing for male pleasure while males enjoy a broader array of portrayals. By applying the feminist theory of the male gaze by Laura Mulvey to the analysis, it can further examine the power dynamics, gender roles, and the objectification of women in both visual representations and society at large. This allows for a critical understanding of how women's agency is undermined and how patriarchal structures influence the creation and interpretation of literary and visual texts.

**Keywords:** *Misogynistic Culture, Male gaze, Artistic tradition, Objectification, Power dynamics, Commodification*

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Gender Dynamics in Visual Representation

The female nude has been a subject of artistic exploration for centuries, representing beauty, sensuality, and vulnerability. Throughout art history, artists have depicted the female form in various styles and contexts, conveying themes of femininity, power, and the human experience. These portrayals reflect cultural and societal perspectives on the female

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body and continue to provoke discussions on representation and artistic expression. *Ways of Seeing* is a book that was written by John Berger, exploring the nature of visual culture and the ways in which our perception and understanding of the world are shaped by images. The historical and cultural contexts of art, advertising, and photography are examined in the book, providing insights into the power dynamics, social constructions, and ideological implications that are embedded within visual representations. The representation of women in Western art is the focus of Chapter 3 in *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger. The examination conducted by Berger delves into how women have historically been depicted as objects of the male gaze in art, particularly within the genre of European oil painting. It is argued that women are often portrayed as passive and exist primarily for the pleasure of men. The significance of Chapter 3 lies in its critique of the objectification and sexualization of women in art. The ways in which women's bodies have been constructed and presented to cater to the assumed masculine viewer are exposed, reinforcing traditional gender roles and power dynamics. It is highlighted how the nudity of women in paintings often serves the benefit of the paintings' owners, rather than serving a narrative purpose.

Through the analysis of the representation of women in art, it raises broader questions about the treatment and perception of women in society. The notion that women exist solely for visual consumption is challenged, prompting readers to reflect on the objectifying tendencies embedded within cultural images. The significance of this is within the context of feminist theory is evident, as it draws attention to the gendered power dynamics and the historical diminishing of women's agency in visual representations. It invites critical examination of the male gaze, the construction of femininity, and the need for more inclusive and empowering representations of women in art and media. Overall, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how art reflects and reinforces societal norms and inequalities. It serves as a call to challenge women's objectification and reconsider how they engage with and interpret visual culture.

The male gaze theory formulated by Laura Mulvey is a foundational concept in feminist film theory. In her influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," the theory is explained, stating that:

*In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey, 1975, p. 62)*

The inherent power imbalance between the viewer (primarily male) and the viewed (primarily female) in visual media is highlighted by Mulvey. It is argued by her that the desires and fantasies of the male gaze, influenced by societal structures, are projected onto female figures. Women are positioned as objects to be looked at, presented in a manner that maximizes their visual and erotic impact, reinforcing their role as passive objects of visual pleasure. The theory exposes how the act of looking is not neutral but carries underlying power dynamics, resulting in the objectification of women and the limitation of their agency. It is suggested by Mulvey that women's visibility in visual media is often shaped by and for the pleasure of the male viewer, perpetuating gendered stereotypes and maintaining patriarchal norms.

By incorporating this explanation, the theoretical foundation of the male gaze and its significance in understanding the representation of women in visual culture can be further established. The power dynamics at play are demonstrated, setting the stage for further analysis and discussion regarding how the male gaze operates in various forms of media and its broader implications for gender equality and representation.



Figure 1: Reclining Bacchante by Felix Trutat, 1824-48, Musee Des Beaux Arts, Dijon

In chapter 3, Berger begins with a depiction of Trutat's resting Bacchante, in the painting, we see a woman resting on leopard-print sheets, unclothed, while a man looks out of a window. The painting captures the viewer's attention with the woman as the focal point, her body positioned to face away from the male figure, seemingly unaffected by his presence. Instead, her gaze and body language direct us towards the world outside the painting. John Berger delves into the disparity between the social conventions that govern the presence and representation of women versus men. He explores how societal expectations and norms shape our perception of gender and influence the dynamics within the artwork. It is stated by Berger that the presence of men is defined by how they represent power, wherein their striking presence is determined by their ability to promise and potentially wield power in physical, sexual, economic, or moral aspects. However, the power they possess is external to themselves. On the other hand, the presence of a woman is believed to indicate her own attitude towards herself. Women are read by the world based on their attire, taste, ideas, and gestures, leading to the notion that physical signifiers alone can reveal an inherent element of their being.

## 2. The Modest Female Nude

The "modest" (Berger, 1972, p. 49) naked female art-historical stereotype is deftly unpacked by Berger. The emphasis on biblical legends and the preference for representing nude women in Renaissance art, with their privates covered by well-placed fig leaves, can be observed. The ladies in these paintings appear to be modest regarding the viewer, not ashamed of their nudity in proportion to their surroundings. Modesty—or lack thereof—became a technique of signalling the ideals or intentions of the ladies being shown as the tradition of painting female nudes evolved. Some female nudists are self-consciously modest, while others are aware of their provocative immodesty and wink at the viewer. In any scenario, their status is established by how they appear to respond to an imagined viewer: in short, female nudity is always self-aware, and a woman's morality may be deduced from how she appears to respond to being seen nude. As Berger points out, this is blatantly sexist: while males have a certain amount of confrontational power, the painted woman is "not naked as she is" (Berger, 1972, p. 50) as the observer sees her, "she is nude" (Berger, 1972, p. 50). In this manner, the painting incorporates an imagined male viewer, effectively integrating the male-dominated dynamics of a particular era into the artwork itself. This inclusion serves to emphasize the prevailing power imbalances and societal norms of that time. John Berger explores how such gendered perspectives and expectations become deeply ingrained within the artwork, thereby reflecting the historical context and reinforcing the predominance of male viewpoints. Through his analysis of the presence and depiction of women in art, Berger sheds light on how societal structures and biases are not only reflected but also perpetuated through artistic representations. It further shows the differential representation of men and women in both pictures and society. It reveals that agency is often attributed to males, while women are often confined to the perpetual task of self-presentation, diverting their attention from external responsibilities. This summary is famously noted by Berger as "Men act while women appear" (Berger, 1972, p. 49). This link, it is observed, is particularly visible in a certain genre of European oil painting that frequently features naked female figures. The nudity of these ladies in the paintings often does not serve the narratives in which they are depicted, but rather it is constructed by and for the (supposedly) masculine observer. The self-conscious display of their sexuality by women through their nudity is accused of vanity, with associations made to symbols like mirrors and beauty products, despite women seldom being the ones behind this pictorial tradition. Instead, women appeared naked for the benefit of the paintings' owners, who constituted their primary audience throughout most of history. Although pictures are more readily accessible now, many elements of this representational legacy persist, presenting women as passive or existing for male pleasure, while males enjoy a broader range of portrayals.

According to Berger, a massive instance of hypocrisy forms the basis of the entire system of gender relations: it assumes that the (male) spectator is a subjective individual while denying any individual agency to the (female) subject. The persistence of this contradiction in media images of women today showcases the continued relevance of Berger's Marxist-feminist argument, even after four decades have passed.

*Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.* (Berger, 1972, p. 47)

John Berger proposes an idea in his work that would later become central to feminist media theory. He suggests that women are expected by society to constantly monitor their own appearance and be conscious of how they present themselves. This expectation arises from the belief that judgments about women's lives, behaviors, and personalities are based on their external appearance. In other words, societal assumptions are derived from the surface-level observations of women. This notion highlights the objectification and scrutiny that women face, where their worth and identity are often reduced to their physical appearance. Feminist media theory expands on this idea by examining how media representations perpetuate and reinforce societal expectations and stereotypes placed upon women. On the other hand, men take on the role of surveyors: they are the imagined spectators for whom women must dress and exercise the powers

of image-making and representation. It is worth noting that men occupy an active position within this power dynamic, while women assume a passive role, engaging in gazing rather than looking. In Laura Mulvey's 1975 book *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, she extensively drew on this theory. In classic Hollywood films, she examined how women are portrayed as passive subjects displaying their "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1999), while males are empowered to gaze at them.

In both life and art, different treatment is demanded of men and women according to social convention: males are seen as having a potential for power that extends beyond their own bodies, while the entirety of women's essence is expected to reside in their physical appearance. Consequently, women are constantly obligated to scrutinize themselves, fully aware that their outer appearance will be assessed by male viewers to determine their interests, morals, and personalities. The following paradigm is suggested by Berger to simplify this dynamic: "men act and women appear" (Berger, 1972, p. 49). In the act of looking, men assume the role of observers, while women are positioned as objects of observation, constantly aware of how they are being viewed. This dynamic is particularly prominent in a specific European tradition of oil painting, where the representation of nude female figures is pervasive. Throughout the history of these paintings, from early depictions of Adam and Eve to more contemporary works, a woman's nudity is defined in relation to the viewer. She is either portrayed with shame and modesty or with confidence and self-assurance—rarely existing as simply naked and unaware of being seen. Even as nudity in oil painting gradually became more secular, feminine figures continued to be distinguished by their awareness of the viewer. This awareness is occasionally the subject of the painting itself, as seen in Tinoretto's *Sisannah and the Elders*: the lady glances at herself in a mirror, just as the spectator does in the picture. The act of staring at a naked lady becomes the artwork's focal point. Paradoxically, mirrors in such paintings often symbolized women's vanity, allowing painters to criticize the so-called "vanity" (Berger, 1972, p. 51) of female characters depicted in a state of naked enjoyment. However, the symbolic use of a mirror in this context further strengthens the idea that women are predominantly expected to be treated (and treat themselves) as mere objects of visual consumption.

This concept is evident in later artworks like "The Judgement of Paris," where Helen of Troy is acclaimed as the epitome of beauty. The painting depicts a competition among women, competing for the validation of their beauty from a male figure. However, what is the ultimate prize? According to Berger, the prize is "to be owned" (Berger, 1972, p. 52)—that is, to be immortalized in a painting that a male owner will have the pleasure of enjoying (Figure 2).

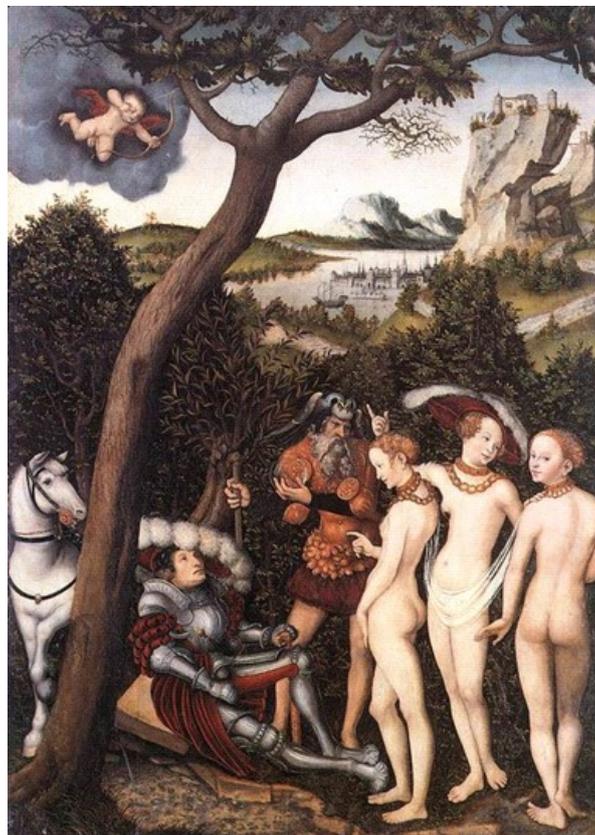


Figure 2: Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Judgement of Paris*, 1472-1553, Landesmuseum, Gotha

In this artistic tradition, the portrayal of female nudity is never an expression of the woman's own desires, but rather a surrender to the gaze of onlookers. A brief comment by Berger acknowledges that this characteristic is specific to European art, as many other cultures depict sexuality through paired couples where both the man and the woman assume active roles.

### 3. The Spectatorial Position

Berger extensively examines the profound connection between a spectator and the object they observe, delving into the intricate dynamics of their interaction. He thoroughly explores how the act of looking influences our perception and understanding of the world around us. The act of looking at a painting is not a one-sided or static experience, but rather a malleable and relational one. Different viewers will engage with the same artwork in various ways, resulting in the development of meaning through their interaction rather than being inherent to the piece itself. The painting's meaning emerges from the spectator's interpretation and is influenced by their position (both physical and ideological). The symbols within the painting are "read" (Berger, 1972, p. 47) by the viewer, and they choose which formal qualities to emphasize. Berger argues that the difference between a painting featuring a naked woman and a conventional "nude" (Berger, 1972, p. 47) lies in the way the nudity of the female figure is constructed by and for the viewer. The painting is deliberately crafted in a way that the nude woman confronts the viewer, catering to their imaginations. While the observer may not physically be a part of the painting, their interaction with it remains crucial to the artwork's meaning.

Berger draws a contrast between "the naked" (Berger, 1972, p. 90) and "the nude" (Berger, 1972, p. 92). "The naked" (Berger, xxxx, p. 90) is always conventionalized and lacks individuality. To be a nudist is to put oneself on display, but to be naked is to simply "be oneself" (Berger, 1972, p. 54). In a conventional European oil painting, the protagonist of the painting's story exists outside the artwork itself, with the viewer assumed to be a male. The remaining elements of the painting subtly engage with the viewer, either through direct frontal positioning or by directing the subject's gaze towards the viewer. Consequently, the conventions of nude painting convey the notion that the depicted figures have willingly embraced their nudity for the sake of the viewer—an aspect that contributes to a power fantasy, reinforcing the viewer's masculine sexuality. This tendency continues in contemporary photography, as exemplified by Berger's comparison of a photograph from a pornographic magazine with Ingres' painting, "La Grande Odalisque." In both instances, the focal point is a central female figure in a state of undress, who consciously gazes at the viewer, purposefully presenting her femininity and sexual attractiveness. The nude painting, unlike the naked, is defined by a world in which everything revolves around the viewer's sexual gratification.

However, there are exceptions to this rule. Berger explores a few paintings of naked women that are not "nude" (Berger, 1972, p. 92) but rather "naked" (Berger, 1972, p. 47). This is sometimes the case when the painter's passion for the subject leads them to the edge out the viewer, allowing the spectator to witness the love between the painter and the subject rather than immersing themselves in fantasy. Painting nakedness presents challenges because, despite the magnetic attraction of seeing a loved one naked in real life, human bodies can ultimately be quite ordinary, and depicting them unremarkably can be unsettling. There is something repulsive, even terrifying, about a precisely accurate depiction of a naked person without a sense of mystery. As a result, painters often find it easier to represent their figures as generic "nudes" (Berger, 1972, p. 92), allowing the audience to project their own imaginations onto them.

Berger does provide an example of an exceptional nude painting: Rubens' *Helene Fourment in a Fur Coat*. The artist portrays his wife as she turns around, quickly draping a fur coat over her shoulders to conceal her private parts. The painting freezes a moment in time, enabling the observer to easily envision a moment when the figure was completely nude, coexisting with the captured moment in the painting. Certain aspects of her physique are unrealistic, while others are depicted with great care and attention to reality. Berger argues that this particular painting goes beyond the conventional portrayal of a nude, which often reduces and marginalizes the subject. Instead, it enables the artist to depict his girlfriend in all her unique and "extraordinary particularity" (Berger, 1972, p. 61).

### 4. The Split Woman (Metaphor)

Berger also discusses the social standing of women in current culture and how it is just it is related to female nude in paintings:

*The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. (Berger, 1972, p. 46)*

While it is evident that gender inequality conditions are oppressive, they are not typically severe enough to result in the physical division of women. Instead, it is implied by Berger that women are compelled to assume a dual role, constantly surveilling themselves. In a sense, they are always accompanied by their own self-perception or the images

they believe they project to the world. In other words, a woman's consciousness is divided between the parts of herself that observe and those that are observed: her agency to act and her awareness of how she appears. According to Berger, men, on the other hand, simply observe others without scrutinizing themselves, never experiencing the same divided consciousness.

The detrimental impact of this differentiation on women is further explained by Berger. He states, "To be born a woman has to be born, within an assigned and confined space, under the control of men" (Berger, 1972, p. 46). Consequently, women are compelled to constantly surveil themselves, maintaining an awareness of their presentation to the world. "A woman's self-being is divided into two" (Berger, 1972, p. 46). Consequently, women's identities are constructed through this dichotomy of being both the observer and the observed. This division hinders their capacity to exercise agency fully, as they experience the pressure to conform to the expectations and desires of others. This is reinforced by the fact that men are always scrutinizing women and making judgments based on their findings. In order to exert some influence over this unjust process, women are compelled to surveil themselves before being subjected to others' scrutiny, perpetuating an ongoing project of self-regulation. This fundamental distinction between male and female presence is highlighted: "men act and women appear" (Berger, 1972, p. 46), implying that feminine presence is oriented towards creating appearances, while male presence is self-sufficient.

To elucidate this complex issue, Berger employs an example of an oil painting featuring a naked woman. In the early tradition of artistic portrayals, the biblical figures of Adam and Eve were often depicted in relation to their awareness of nudity and the subsequent experience of shame. It is worth noting that in this narrative, Eve is often held responsible for their expulsion from Paradise, while Adam is portrayed as an agent of God. While the depiction of Adam and Eve has a long history since medieval times, a shift occurred during the Renaissance period, capturing them in a single pivotal moment: the moment of humiliation, reminiscent of a sequential strip cartoon or narrative arc. Their humiliation is recognized in relation to the audience, thanks to the solitude of the situation. By the twentieth century, this humiliation had transformed into a kind of performance, with naked individuals intentionally addressing the observer. Berger illustrates this with an example of an underwear advertisement. The self-aware nudity and lack of guilt exhibited by the "Adam and Eve" (Berger, 1972, p. 46) figures in the advertisement symbolize one effect that commercialization aims to promote, aside from selling underwear.

With the secularization of the painting tradition, more opportunities arose for the portrayal of nudes, and a recurring theme became apparent: women were depicted as never being naked in reference to themselves but rather as being naked "as she is seen by the spectator" (Berger, 1972, p. 49). Within this artistic tradition, nude women frequently direct their gaze towards the viewer or a mirror, inviting the observer to engage in a process of self-reflection. However, the use of mirrors in these portrayals often serves to depict women's vanity—an ironic depiction given that these paintings were crafted by male artists for their own entertainment. As per Berger's perspective, the mirrors in these images serve a deeper purpose by unveiling how women predominantly view themselves as objects meant to be observed.

The analysis of Rubens' "The Judgement of Paris" (Berger, 1972, p. 51) follows in the subsequent photo essay. The act of judgment becomes evident in this painting as Paris awards an apple to Helen, the woman he considers the most attractive. The suggested system rewards the most attractive women. Berger contends that the real "prize" (Berger, 1972, p. 52) is to be owned by the judge of one's attractiveness. To illustrate this system further, he provides another example—a painting by Lely commissioned by Charles the Second—depicting one of the King's mistresses passively looking at the audience while reclined in the nude. The nudity in this case is a result of the woman's obedience to the King's demands, rather than her own choice. In a way, he possesses the woman because he possesses the artwork.

Berger draws attention to the fact that nakedness is never employed as a means of marginalizing women in non-European painting traditions. In his analysis, Berger examines a range of artworks from Persian, African, and Pre-Columbian cultures, noting that when a piece intends to convey sexual concepts, it does so by depicting explicit sexual intercourse between two individuals, rather than isolating a woman as a passive object of observation. In this passage, he references Kenneth Clark's assertion that "to be naked is simply to be without clothes, whereas the nude is a form of art" (Berger, 1972, p. 53). Berger partially agrees, acknowledging that the naked is always conventionalized and derives its legitimacy from tradition, but he further deconstructs this statement to question the underlying implications of these norms. He notes that the naked female figure in paintings is connected to experienced sexuality in a humiliating manner: "To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself" (Berger, 1972, p. 54). Nudity becomes a form of presentation where the external markers of physical form are exchanged for a more significant existence.

Within the European tradition of oil painting, the focal point of a nude painting is not within the artwork itself, but rather lies outside it—the observer. Every aspect depicted in the painting is oriented towards the viewer, typically assumed to be male, as if the figures within the artwork exist solely to cater to his gaze. Berger provides an example from

Bronzino's painting titled "Venus, Cupid, Time, and Love" (Berger, 1972, p. 54). In this artwork, Cupid, the male figure, engages in a kiss with Venus, the female figure. However, the positioning of Venus's body is arranged in a manner that emphasizes its visibility to the male audience external to the painting, rather than conveying a genuine expression of love between the characters. It is unrelated to her own sexuality and instead caters to the viewers. Berger further illustrates this with two additional images—one from an Ingres painting and one from a "girlie magazine" (Berger, 1972, p. 55). Both women wear the same facial expression: they gaze at the viewer, deliberately "offering up her femininity" (Berger, 1972, p. 55) with a calculated smile, radiating charm directed solely at the observer.

## 5. Display As Disguise (Metaphor)

The central point of chapter 3 by Berger, highlights the contrast between "nude" (Berger, 1972, p. 47) and "naked" (Berger, 1972, p. 47). According to his analysis, nakedness is portrayed as a natural state inherent in the universe, whereas nudity is characterized by its dependence on a particular connection to a spectator: one cannot be considered nude unless they are observed by others. Further clarification on this distinction is provided by Berger:

*To be on display is to have the surface of one's own skin, the hairs of one's own body, turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never be discarded.* (Berger, 1972, p. 54)

Although the appearance of a naked person and a nude person may seem indistinguishable, a shift occurs when the naked individual becomes the subject of a spectator's gaze. This transition, as implied by Berger, involves the transformation of one's own skin into a disguise, even though the act of being stared at does not bring about any physical alteration. The distinction between these portrayals is contingent upon the positioning of the naked figure in relation to the viewer: are they facing outward in a frontal manner or contorted to cater to the visual pleasure of the spectator? In cases where the latter is true, it is likely considered a "nude" (Berger, 1972, p. 47), signifying that the inherent qualities or attributes of the subject are suppressed in favour of their physical appearance, which serves the viewer's gaze. This elucidates how one's own body can be "turned into a disguise" (Berger, 1972, p. 54), abandoning features that could provide depth or individuality in favour of a generic representation onto which the viewer's imagination can readily project.

In paintings depicting the male counterparts of naked women, Berger observes that the woman's focus is seldom directed toward him. Instead, she averts her gaze away from him, directing her attention beyond the boundaries of the image and towards the viewer. This positioning grants the spectator a sense of power, allowing them to envision themselves as the "true lover—the spectator-owner" (Berger, 1972, p. 56). In the seventeenth century, a distinct school of pornographic painting employed similar conventions to depict loving couples, consistently directing the woman's gaze toward the spectator, allowing them to immerse themselves in the fantasy. Nearly all naked European iconography adopts a frontal approach since the viewer is intended to envision themselves as the protagonist in such scenarios. Berger argues that this dynamic between the painting and the viewer serves as a peculiar means of bolstering the viewer's self-assurance and offering comfort in times of distress, reaffirming their masculinity as the intended recipient of this portrayal of feminine sexuality.

Berger proceeds to discuss a few exceptional deviations from this tradition, encompassing "paintings of loved women, more or less naked" (Berger, 1972, p. 57). Within these paintings, the artist's personal interpretation of the subject becomes paramount, leading to the exclusion of the spectator. As a result, the viewer is compelled to observe the interaction between the artist and the subject, rather than being able to actively engage and immerse themselves in the narrative of the painting. Berger highlights the transformative power present in these unique images, as they prevent the spectator from deluding themselves into thinking that the woman's nudity exists solely for their own pleasure. Berger acknowledges the inherent complexity of depicting nakedness in art: while nudity undoubtedly carries a sexual connotation in reality, it also serves a visual purpose. The sight of a desired lover in a state of yearning is undeniably captivating and evokes a sense of urgency. Simultaneously, it can be somewhat clichéd, as any nude individual is "more like the rest of their sex than they are different" (Berger, 1972, p. 59). This banality underscores the fact that sex is a shared subjective experience. Capturing a static image of sexual nakedness (as opposed to a generalized "nude" (Berger, 1972, p. 47)) is therefore exceedingly challenging: isolating a singular moment from the lived experience of sexual encounters is inherently reductive. As a result, photographers and artists often find it easier to classify their subjects as ambiguous "nudes" (Berger, 1972, p. 47), allowing the spectator to project their own vision onto the artwork, relieving the burden of the artist's task.

## 6. Female Subjectivity

Throughout the examination of female nudity, the assessment of whether the depicted ladies in the artworks under consideration are accurately represented is conducted by Berger. The dominant representational traditions in art history

portray women as passive, self-reflective, and fixated on their appearances while granting males more agency and subjectivity. This disparity is particularly evident in the case of the female nude, where the female subject's positioning as "nude" (Berger, 1972, p. 47) rather than simply "naked" (Berger, 1972, p. 47) is contingent upon the presence of the (presumably male) spectator. Essentially, women in the paintings perceive themselves as being observed, positioning themselves as objects of the viewer's gaze, while males in similar artworks exhibit other discernible features, interests, qualities, and activities beyond mere presentation to the audience.

Next, attention is turned to Helene Fourment, depicted wearing a Rubens Fur Coat. The painting portrays the artist's second wife, depicted in the moment of averting her gaze from the viewer. Clad in an iconic fur coat that delicately rests on her shoulders, she teeters on the edge of revealing her nakedness, yet for now, she remains partially covered.



**Figure 3: Peter Paul Rubens, *Helene Fourment in a Fur Coat*, 1577-1640, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna**

According to Berger, this image "contains time and its experience," (Berger, 1972, p. 61) urging the viewer to imagine how she would be fully nude a minute later. Through a portrayal that incorporates two physical impossibilities—the upper and lower parts of her body rotating separately—the woman's body is depicted as more dynamic, indicating her hidden pelvis, the center of her sexuality, and the point where these two impossible halves converge. Rubens manages to transcend the earlier described banality while maintaining a level of originality that cannot be achieved in a nude painting solely for the pleasure of a generic male viewer.

Berger proceeds to explain that these paintings are rooted in the European humanist intellectual tradition, which upholds the value of uniqueness. The supposed personality of the painting's spectator, often a man, is not represented in its nude female figures, who are considered by the male observer as "things or abstractions" (Berger, 1972, p. 62). This conflict permeates modern art, troubling painters as they strive to reconcile it. An example of this struggle is found in Manet's *Olympia*, where the lady, placed in the customary position of the "nude" (Berger, 1972, p. 47), begins to openly challenge her connection with the audience. This trend remains unbroken as the same underlying beliefs that contribute to the subjugation of women have extended to other forms of media. Consequently, many of the images' people encounter today exemplify a similar "way of seeing" as the late oil-painted nudes: women exist as images created primarily to flatter a male audience. Inspired by Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Berger sheds light on the deliberate portrayals and behaviours of female characters in Alfred Hitchcock films and classical Hollywood

cinema. These portrayals are carefully crafted to cater to the pleasure of the male protagonist, inviting male viewers to identify with the protagonist and project themselves into cinematic fantasy. Similar to Mulvey, Berger urges us to question our passive acceptance of gendered representations in media. By recognizing the underlying codes and the impact they have, he hopes to inspire a transformation that challenges and transcends these norms.

## 7. Conclusion

These discussions can be connected to misogynistic culture, it explores the objectification of women in visual culture and the ways in which women are often portrayed and perceived in art and advertising. The gender relations system that is incorporated into most nude art is inherently contradictory: it relies on the spirit of individuality by being appealing to a subjective observer, while simultaneously depicting women as objects or abstractions devoid of individual subjectivity. While the ability to be active observers, creators, and even owners of paintings was granted to males, women were confined to presenting and scrutinizing their own femininity. Gradually, as the questioning of entrenched representational strategies becomes more prevalent, a shift has begun to take place. Nevertheless, the principles ingrained within the tradition of the female nude persist in various media forms, leading to the portrayal of women as passive objects catering to the idealized gaze of the male spectator. The significance of this lies in the recognition and challenge of the male-dominated perspectives that shape our understanding of art and visual culture. It urges a critical examination of how images reinforce societal norms and expectations, particularly regarding gender roles. By revealing the constructed nature of gendered representations, attention is drawn to the necessity of dismantling the objectifying gaze and promoting more inclusive and empowering portrayals of women in both art and society. By adopting a feminist lens, it can continue to challenge and transform the representation of women, striving for equality, agency, and a more inclusive understanding of art and society.

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