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*The eroticisation of female suicide and mental illness through the male gaze in art and media
and the corresponding reflections of the female gaze.*

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I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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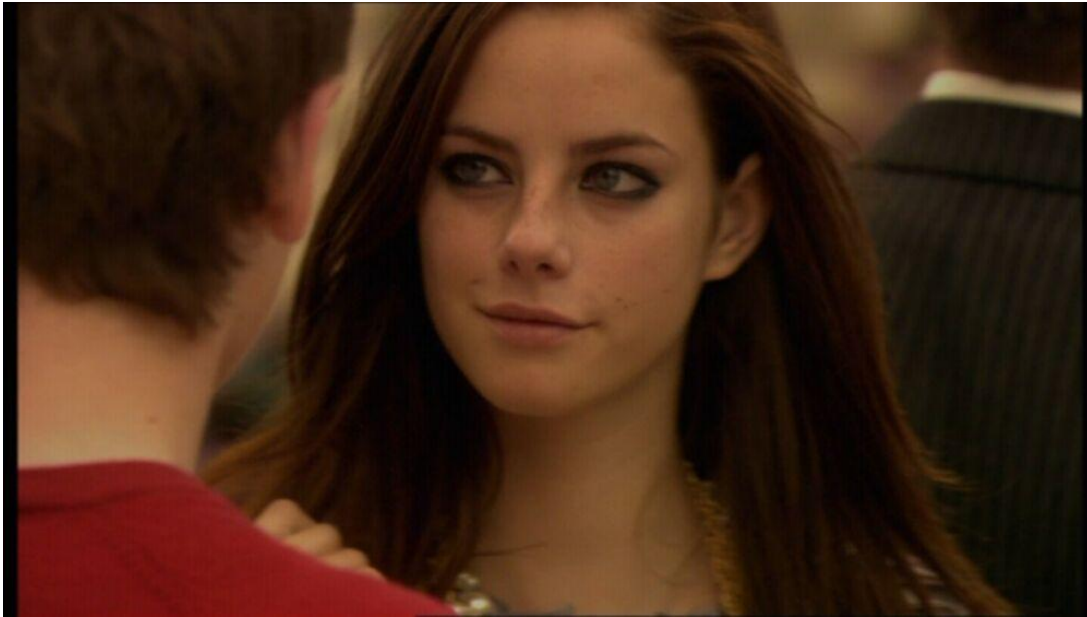


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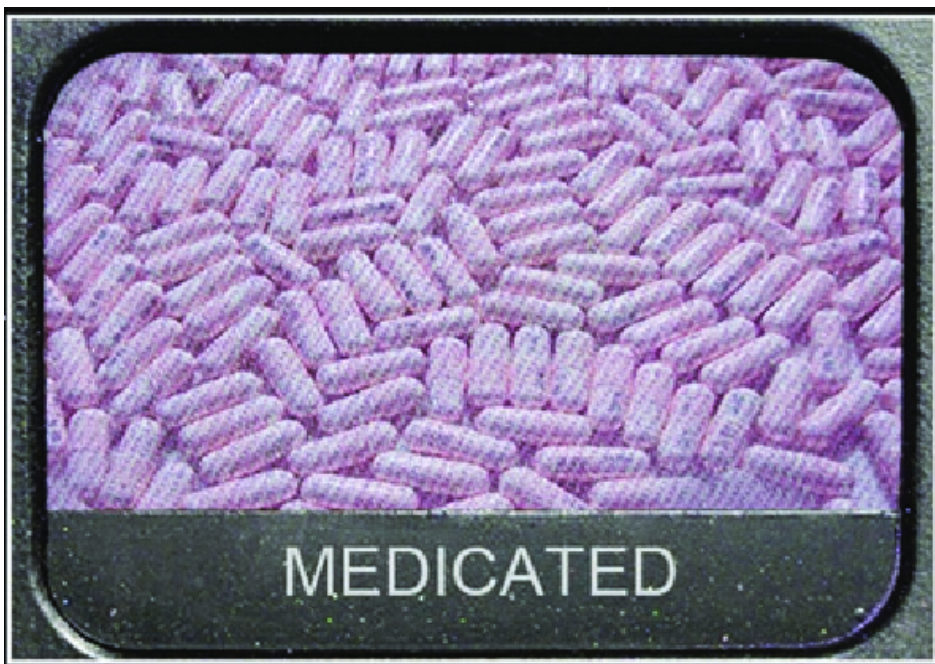


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INTRODUCTION

Suicide, like woman and truth, is both fetish and taboo. A symbolic gesture, it is doubly so for women who inscribe on their own bodies cultural reflections and projections, affirmation and negation (Higonnet, 1985, pg 68).

The fetishisation of female suicide and mental illness is a prevalent, and often overlooked, topic in both historical and contemporary society, sustained by the customary and patriarchal art and media of the times. I will discuss the relationship between female suicide and mental illness and the historical male gaze; and, similarly, the corresponding perspective of the contemporary female gaze. I will be using an analytical frame that draws on both historical artworks and poetry, in addition to contemporary media to illustrate the persistence of this dynamic of the male gaze from the historical to the contemporary. I will discuss the structure of the male gaze, and its deep rooted prevalence in shaping female identity in cultural fields, in which the dead woman reflects the idealised unassertive feminine body. Through the male gaze, female suicide is associated with traditionally feminine attributes: sensitivity, being swept away by emotion and submission to forces larger than oneself (Matcher, 2013).

In this study, the first reference to historical art and media documenting female suicide is the poem 'The Bridge of Sighs', written by Thomas Hood in 1844, where he chronicles his thoughts as he observes the corpse of a young woman fished from the river. I will discuss the objectifying and patriarchal tone of the poem in relation to the masculine conception of female suicide. Similarly, the public and media romanticisation of the story of 'L'inconnue de la Seine' narrates the societal fascination of the dead woman, and the speculations of her love, or lack of love. Historically, female suicide has been affiliated to the malady of feminine love-melancholy or erotomania (Showalter, 1985, pg 81), which is particularly so in the case of Shakespeares Ophelia, whose death has been an artistic inspiration to many. The portrayal of Ophelia that I will be addressing in this thesis is the 1852 painting by Sir John

Everett Millais; moreover, I will be considering the cultural impact of the character of Ophelia in shaping a narrative on feminine mental illness and suicide. The eroticisation of female mental illness through the male gaze can be largely attributed to the hypothesis of hysteria, which has always been perceived as peculiarly relevant to the female experience, and has almost always carried with it an erotic implication (Smith-Rosenberg, 1972, pg 652). Through the contemporary male gaze, I found that there is an added dimension of the intersection of gender and whiteness, where mental illness is more socially acceptable in the form of a straight, white woman. In the case of one of my contemporary media references, Effy Stonem from the television series 'Skins', mental illness makes her increasingly attractive and alluring to men who want to 'fix' her. I will be discussing the structure of the female gaze as a direct reflection of the male gaze analysed through the concepts of Margaret Attwood and John Berger, thereby questioning the true emancipation of the contemporary female gaze from the conditioned perspectives of the male gaze. Thus, I observe how the female gaze is inclined to romanticise issues of female mental illness, with the rise of the Tumblr 'Sad Girl', and musicians such as Mitski documenting her own struggles through an aestheticised approach. In relation to this, I will discuss her song, 'Last Words of a Shooting Star' (2014), as a representative narrative of the feminine perspective of mental illness and suicide. However, I have found that there is evidence of a counter position unencumbered by male hegemony to be found in the works of radical female artists and through the queer gaze. Tracey Emin's films 'My Bed' portrays female mental illness without the spectacle of the female body at all, instead the work displays unappealing aspects of feminine struggle. Although I focus predominantly on the binarised hetero-normative gazes in this study, I conclude by asking if the queer gaze is the only truly liberated lens of female mental illness and suicide.

CHAPTER 1: Historical Reference

Despite the perspective of the male gaze functioning as the cultural norm in society, the term itself is relatively new. This theoretical perspective was first introduced by Laura Mulvey in her 1973 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', where she observes:

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 phantasy on the female figure... 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, 1973, pg 837). [check spacing in quote]

Mulvey credits the paradox of 'phallocentrism' for the establishment of the male gaze; in which men serve as the principal human form, and, therefore, women as the subsidiary 'other' (1973, pg 837). In a world dominated by masculine perception, the male gaze has been the primary basis for the construction of all societal and cultural standards; in which it considers the feminine body as a vessel for priapic fulfilment and possession. In 'The Female Body', Margaret Attwood observes this premise:

And he grinds his teeth because she doesn't understand... searching for the other half, the twin who could complete him. Then it comes to him: he's lost the Female Body! Look it shines in the gloom, far ahead, a vision of wholeness... Catch it. Put it in a pumpkin, in a high tower, in a compound, in a chamber, in a house, in a room. Quick, stick a leash on it, a lock, a chain, some pain, settle it down, so it can never get away from you again (Attwood, 1990, pg 493).

The male gaze projects the idealisation of the compliant governed woman's servitude, both emotionally and physically, to the needs and desires of the superior masculine. The most dominant and pervasive cultural perceptions and ideologies of the female have been almost entirely formulated through male perception. This narrative is evident in almost every documentation of art and media in existence. The accepted norm is that men create art and media, the purpose of which is to be viewed and consumed by other men. Berger distinctively captures the gendered nature of this significant power imbalance between subject and object in 'Ways of Seeing', where he noted that the woman serves as a spectacle for the man, whilst the man serves as the owner of both woman and painting (1972, pg 52).

In practice, female artists have been consistently underrepresented and undermined throughout history, art was neither for them, nor created by them. Even in recent years, art and modern media are both predominantly male-driven industries, with only 30% of the art showcased in the Tate group of galleries being created by women in 2020 (Frisby, 2020). Art and media have primarily been created through a masculine lens, and to be viewed similarly. The dominance of masculinity is elaborated in 'Ways of Seeing', as John Berger discusses how the male gaze distorts the presence and impression of the feminine body in art:

You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and called the painting 'Vanity', thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure (Berger, 1972, pg 51).

Berger interrogates the representation of the female, contributing to critical understanding of the significance of the male gaze (1972, 51). The hyper-sexualisation and objectification of women exists only due to the existence of the male gaze; however, when the female embraces such sexuality, she is rejected and criticised by the man, as woman exists as the servitor for man. The female presence, surveyed through the male gaze, acts as a sight, rather than a human existence separate from the viewer. As Berger states: "men survey women before treating them" (Berger, 1972, pg 46).

A particularly notable depiction in art which captures the problematic nature of the male gaze is the representation of the dead woman as a feminine ideal. "The death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" declares Edgar Allan Poe in his 1846 essay, 'The Philosophy of Composition', (1846, pg 6). The eroticisation of the dead woman gained widespread societal prevalence during the Romantic Period, where artists and writers fawned over the enchanting thoughts of young, attractive, deceased women. The dead woman was a remarkable reflection of the idealised woman during this period; she was submissive, elusive, and fossilised in her youth. Her body is thin,

it is passive, her needs are few (Matchar, 2013). Thomas Hood illustrates these ideals in the 1844 poem, *The Bridge of Sighs*; which was written about the corpse of a suicidal young woman, after her body had been fished from the waters of the river Seine:

Take her up tenderly,
Lift her with care;
Fashion'd so slenderly
Young, and so fair! (Hood, 1844).

Hood describes the woman as “pure”, after her “stains” and “past dishonour” had been cleansed from her by the water:

Owning her weakness,
Her evil behaviour,
And leaving, with meekness,
Her sins to her Saviour! (Hood, 1844).

Death in water was a particularly romantic concept, as it acted as a preservation of a woman's beauty, Showalter writes: “Drowning too was associated with the feminine, with female fluidity as opposed to masculine aridity... Water is the profound and organic symbol of the liquid woman whose eyes are easily drowned in tears” (Showalter, 1985, pg 81). Women are, however, far more likely to minimise the physical anguish of death by suicide (Hignonnet, 1985, pg 114). This suggests that even in death, the inescapable presence of the male gaze is ever present, and perhaps even more so given the manner in which the female is inanimate, without capacity for self-representation.

In text and visual art, the death of Ophelia is another example of the fetishisation of the drowned and tormented woman. Ophelia has been acclaimed since the Romantic period, as a cult figure who has provoked sensual momentum through the numerous paintings of her corpse, the continuum of her sexual appeal has transcended beyond her Shakespearean existence (Safae, M, Hashim, R, 2013, pg 311). One of the artworks that I will be focusing on in this thesis is John Everett Millais’ 1852 depiction of the deceased Ophelia (Fig 1), beautifully dressed and tranquilly resting amongst pleasant floral imagery. With a pale rosy

complexion, and her mouth rested perfectly in an open pout, she appears to be unafflicted by her suicide. Ophelia's desirability was stimulated by her presentation as a young, beautiful girl passionately and visibly driven to picturesque madness (Showalter, 2016). Her portrayal was pictorial of the docile model of the Victorian woman; who Rosenberg characterises as affectionate and submissive, "She was in essence, to remain a child-woman, never developing the strengths and skills of adult autonomy" (1972, pg 656).



Fig 1.

The 19th century story of 'L'inconnue de la Seine', or the 'Ophelia of the Seine' (Fig 2), captivated the world and the unknown girl became a muse for artists of the time after her corpse was found in the Seine. 'L'inconnue de la Seine' had a similar succession in becoming the image of desirability of her time, and the 'most kissed woman in the world'. "The story goes that when the woman's body was fished out of the water at the Quai du Louvre, the Paris pathologist found her so mesmerizingly beautiful that he ordered a moulder to take a death mask of her face" (Chrisafis, 2007). The unknown woman was idyllic, and her

semblance captivated the world. All three of these women's erotic appeal was entirely established through the picturesque appearance of their suicides. The beautiful dead woman represents the idealistic objectified and pliant archetype coveted by the male gaze. She is representative of the feminine ideal of everlasting youth and silence, impossibly performed by the ageing and responsive alive woman. Towards the end of the twentieth century, feminist critiques exposed the problematic nature of such representation. For example, as Bowars writes on the dead woman: "Her mutilated body is a symbol of how men have been able to deal with women by relegating them to visual objectivity" (1990, pg 218). The dead woman reforms the feminine body to its most submissive form, it acts in conserving her youth and maintaining her idealised structure through the male gaze.



Fig 2

Female suicide has often been attributed to the breakdown of a romantic relationship, and, thus, the deprivation of the male. Through the male gaze, man lives for himself whilst woman lives for man, and consequently, woman dies for the loss of man. However, despite this masculine interpretation, it has been found that divorced men are actually more than eight times more likely to die of suicide than divorced women (Kposowa, 2003). Nevertheless, this

idea has been a prominent archetype in the development of the eroticisation of female suicide, as it acted as a formula in subjecting the feminine existence as a servile reliance to the masculine. Ophelia has long been depicted as a powerless, love- swept, and deranged subsidiary character hinged to Hamlet's personal development. Driven by intellectual and imaginative genius, Hamlet was the prototype of masculine madness, however, Ophelia's affliction was considered to be love-madness. Biological and emotional in origin, it was prompted by her unrequited love (Showalter, 2016), the emotional being lesser than the intellectual. Unlike Hamlet's metaphysical madness, Ophelia's was a product of her female nature and 'love melancholy' (Showalter, 1985, pg 80). Furthermore as Showalter illustrates "female love- melancholy were sentimentalized versions which minimized the force of female sexuality, and made female insanity a pretty stimulant to male sensibility" (1985, pg 82). In Sir John Everett Mallais' depiction, Ophelia rests peacefully, restituted to Hamlet's object of romantic relations. She resides as the 'other' to Hamlet, merely an extension of his character. When Hamlet betrays the enamoured Ophelia, her character is unnecessary, as she rests herself as the silenced woman, maddened by love.

'L'inconnue de la Seine' has been similarly associated with equivalent male- centric understandings of female suicide. On account of the young woman's mystery, artists and writers could project their romantic fantasies onto the corpse, many suggesting that she had died for love, or lack of. Chrisafis observes, "nothing disturbed and captured the imagination like suicide- especially that of a young beautiful young woman who might have taken her life because of a broken heart" (Chrisafis, 2007). The consistent representation of women who commit suicide for love complements the familiar assumption that woman live to be loved by a man, rather than for her own individual experience (Hignonnet, 1985, pg 108), again

relegating woman on the basis of her relationship to man, a male defined object rather than autonomous being.

Through the male gaze, female suicide is dismissed as a feminine issue, and instead aligned back to masculine dominance and principal influence. The unknown woman of the Seine was representative of this, as men across Europe entangled her with stories of a broken love story and heartache. Female suicide is assumed irrational if not resituated back to female submission and dependence on the masculine. In *The Bridge of Sighs*, Hood wonders if the dead woman had a lover in her shortened life:

Or was there a dearer one
Still, and a nearer one
Yet, than all other? (Hood, 1844)

However, Hood did not limit the presentation of love to solely romantic relations, and additionally refers to familial love in the case of the woman. This differs from my previous references that cling to the objective of female dependency on romantic love from the male. Nevertheless, Hood still suggests that this woman's suicide could have been a response to the withdrawal of said love from her:

Sisterly, brotherly,
Fatherly, motherly
Feelings had changed:
Love, by harsh evidence,
Thrown from its eminence; (Hood, 1844).

Still, Hood indicates that her suicide was not an action of individual suffering, but instead a reflection of the feminine emotional reliance on the other. Higonnet declares that the woman's "self- destruction is most often perceived as motivated by love, understood not only as loss of self but as surrender to an illness: *le mal d'amour*" (Higonnet, 1985, pg 106).

The eroticisation of female mental illness has served a major role in the sexualisation of female suicide in art and media, particularly the propagation of the feminine condition of hysteria. Hysteria was perceived by society as a disease that is both peculiarly feminine and peculiarly sexual. The hysterical woman was fearful of her own sexual impulses, instead channelling that energy into psychosomatic illness (Smith- Rosenberg, 1972). Showalter expresses that throughout history there has been an invariably strong romantic interest in the relationship between female sexuality and madness (2016). Feminine mental illness and hysteric expressions were often credited towards either sexual repression or intensely magnified sexual desires.

Hustvedt points out the corresponding symptoms of the hysterical woman to the post-traumatic stress disorder experienced by many combat soldiers returning from war; “we find a link between the ordinary combat soldier with hysterical symptoms and the woman, past and present, who have suffered from the same symptoms outside of war- a sense of helplessness in the face of overwhelming, uncontrollable circumstances” (Hustvedt, 2016, pg 412). After the corpse of ‘L’inconnue de la Seine’ was fished from the Seine, she became an erotic icon of her period. It has even been indicated that German actresses of the time modelled themselves to reflect her appearance (Johnson, 1992, pg 230). It was most common for women to commit suicide in the Seine, particularly prostitutes; whose corpses were then publicly displayed in the famous Parisian window of the dead. Chrisafis reflects on Zola’s 1867 novel, *Therese Raquin*, where he described gangs of boys who ran from the length of the window, to stop only in front of the female corpses (Chrisafis, 2007). Through the male gaze, the corpses of these women were consumed as objects of masculine desire, and sexual beings, even in their deaths. The societal impressions of feminine mental illnesses was largely categorised as hysteria, which was credited to sexual excess, commonly amongst

prostitutes but even within marriage. It was similarly questioned whether the woman in *The Bridge of Sighs* was a prostitute, as it was common for London sex workers to jump into the River Thames, so perhaps this happened frequently in Paris also. Although uncertain of her story, Hood reflects on the supposed 'sins' and 'evil behaviour' of the unidentified young woman, which are likely indications of sexual promiscuity or prostitution:

Owning her weakness,
Her evil behaviour,
And leaving, with meekness,
Her sins to her Saviour! (Hood, 1844).

Ophelia has, throughout history, acted as a reflection of the dominant images of female insanity, which has played a major role in the theoretical construction of insanity in young women (Showalter, 2016). Categorically, Ophelia's behaviour was demonstrative of hysterical symptoms and she has served as a catalyst for the malady diagnosed as erotomania. The artistic appearances and theatrical representations of Ophelia have been habitually sexualised since Shakespearean times. In Millais' 1852 painting, Ophelia can be seen clutching a small bunch of flowers, which Showalter described as a suggestion of the discordant images of female sexuality as both an innocent blossoming and a whorist contamination. In picking and giving away her bunch of flowers, Ophelia is symbolically deflowering herself (Showalter, 1985, pg 81).

Feminine mental disorders have often been directly associated with female sexuality throughout history, perhaps as a consequence of the inherent eroticisation of most aspects of womanhood by the male gaze. The majority of unusual symptoms of female behaviour were attributed to hysteria and accredited to sexual ailments, thus, dismissing the severity of these issues and eroticising female suffering. The idealisation and eroticization of the dead female/woman was in many respects the ultimate expression of male dominance as the subject could never be in a position to respond and therefore was entirely dependent on the

male representation, which sought to remove all agency and reconstruct the female in accordance with male desires.

CHAPTER 2: Contemporary Reference

The fetishisation of the mentally disturbed woman has remained a significant archetype in modern media, which has continued to serve as an expression of the masculine perspective; therefore excluding the experiences of many women that do not align with the conventional female beauty standards of masculine perspective. The beautiful and tormented woman is a manifestation of the masculine fantasy, she is fabricated by her female deficiency and debility. In 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Mulvey considers the male desire for the silenced and subsidiary female body:

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning (Mulvey, 1973, pg 834).

Narrations of the deranged woman are theatrically presented by the media as a method of trivial entertainment. Chapadjiev considers the media's obsession with the suffering woman, from the public chronicling of the mental health issues of Britney Spears and Anna Nicole Smith, to dissecting the life and works of artists who have committed suicide such as Sylvia Plath (Chapadjiev, 2008, pg 11). Images of tragically doomed women are constantly fed to us by the media, immunising us to any real empathy for these women. However, all three of these women are similarly constructed as traditionally desirable and attractive women. As slim, white and heterosexual, their disorders are palatable to the media, and to men. Between 2008- 2015, of the 105 female celebrities who openly spoke about their mental health, 78% were white. Proving that the subject that gets to be open about her difficulties tends to fit the Anglo- American beauty ideals (Thelandersson, 2023, pg 104). Perhaps the most fascinating element of their anguish, through the media gaze, was their wretched fall from beauty, the

perishing of their desirability, not because of the breakdowns themselves but rather due to how those breakdowns had mutated their external form. As their appearances changed, so did their characterisation in the media; no longer identified as troubled beauties, but instead vilified as unhinged lunatics with no erotic desirability or sexual connotations.

In this thesis/study/project I will consider the character of Effy Stonem (Fig 3), from the popular television series 'Skins', as a symbol of the coveted and eroticised mentally anguished teenage girl. Since its 2008 debut, the show has become an emblem in adolescent culture, and Effy Stonem as a significant symbol of sex appeal and anarchy. As a slim, white female, Effy conforms to the digestible tropes of mental illness. Bach observes:

The representation of mental health problems in *Skins* largely enforces representations of mental health problems as something that only affects a particular group of society predominantly white teenage girls rather than allowing viewers to see any diversity in those affected (Bach, 2016).

Her mental health problems suffice as something that makes her increasingly desirable to men. The hypersexualisation of her character, and even some of her symptoms, represents the erotic appeal of the beautiful girl plagued in sadness as a fragmented object requiring a man to 'fix her'. Thus, referring her malady back to the importance of man and male gratification, as opposed to an individual feminine experience. In 'Ways of Seeing', Berger classifies feminine actions, regardless of the direct purpose or motivation, as an indication of how they wish to be treated (Berger, 1972, pg 47). Consequently, through the male gaze, this refers to how she hopes to be perceived and treated by man. In the case of Effy Stonem, through the male gaze, her behaviour is depicted as a direct reflection of her desire to be desirable, and, therefore, as a traditionally attractive girl, she is a presentation of the alluring and hyper sexualised sad girl. This stems from a similar ideation to the historical depiction of the female, albeit represented through different imagery.



Fig 3

Contrary to the male gaze exists the female gaze, which relates to the specific lens through which a woman views the world around her. Similar to the influences of the male gaze, the female gaze is largely influenced by the media consumed by women, which may often be created by women whose eyes the audience is looking through. (Dangerfield, 2022, pg 2) The female gaze subverts the object and places the female as the viewer as opposed to the viewed. Margaret Attwood, however, suggests that the male gaze is inescapable, it shapes and defines the parameters within which girls/women are socialised into ways of seeing also.

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 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 (Attwood, 1993, pg 392).

The female gaze, although opposed to the male gaze, is not entirely separate, and perhaps even a diverted semblance of the male gaze itself- which has always served as the fundamental and governing perspective of the Western world. Whilst the female gaze claims

the woman as the viewer, she becomes both the viewer and the viewed, the surveyor of the woman in herself is male (Berger, 1972, pg 47).

A woman must continually watch herself... From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman (Berger, 1972, pg 47).

Many artists have established a strong identity through their presentations of the female perspective, but in this study I will be focusing my attention on the work of American musician, Mitski, and in particular her song, 'Last Words of a Shooting Star', which chronicles the thoughts of a woman before taking her own life. Mitski offers a sincere and, in many ways, sorrowful narrative of the female experience, and particularly, female sadness. In some ways, the lyrics echo similarities to the words of Thomas Hood in 'The Bridge of Sighs', and, therefore, works as a comparative of the opposing gender attitudes towards female suicide. Aforementioned, the female gaze often includes the position of women watching themselves being looked at, and this inner surveyor is presented in 'Last Words of a Shooting Star':

And I am relieved that I'd left
my room tidy
They'll think of me kindly (Laycock, 2014).

In her final moments of personal reflection, Mitski considers herself through the lens of the viewer, she surveys herself through the gaze of someone else, particularly the physical presentation of herself that she has left behind.

Portrayals of female mental illness and suicide through the female gaze often provides women with a melancholic, and often aestheticised, reflection of their own experience. It is this sense of dramatised relatability that generated the cult following of Effy Stonem amongst teenage girls. Effy presented a sensationalised display of the many conflicting feelings and experiences of being a teenage girl; and, regardless of the far-fetched nature of the show,

teenage girls related to her. Emma Garland writes, “she is melodramatic and completely unrealistic, but that was the point. Effy is a characterization of how teenage girls feel, not how they actually are” (Garland, 2020). Despite her severe struggles with mental illness, Effy Stonem became an idol for teenage girls. She was thin, attractive and the object of all the male characters desire. Because of females' own internalised male gaze, female desire often depends largely on their requirement of being desired, of being a ‘good’ sexual object (L. Tolman, 2005, pg 82). Effy was desired by men, and, thus, she became a model of what teenage girls should become in order to be desired, therefore exposing the inescapability of male positions on female desirability.

It is argued whether the female gaze is simply the male gaze in reverse, or if it is focused on romantic desire, as opposed to sexual arousal. (Dangerfield, 2022, pg 3) Whilst the male gaze largely sexualises the subjects observed, it may be said that the female gaze romanticises. Studies have proposed that the female brain is ‘hardwired’ for empathy, in comparison to the systematic nature of the male brain (Hustvedt, 2016, pg 397), however I do not believe that the romanticising tendencies of women are solely on account of the ‘hardwiring’ of the brain. In ‘Dilemmas of Desire’, Tolman considers that the template for gender relations within heterosexuality is built upon the narrative of romance, which is premised on female passivity and male dominance- thus signifying the normative positions of gender and sexual desire. The romance narrative requires female desire to correspond with their passive position, therefore female desire is only accepted in a romantic relationship with the dominant male. As a consequence, romantic relationships act as a ‘safe space’ for women to explore their sexual desires. “The romance narrative provides girls with limited condoned pleasures buttressed by the constant threat of dangers” (L. Tolman, 2005, pg 81). The proposition of romance has been reinforced to women in order to align with the gender roles established by

the male gaze. Inevitably, the female gaze largely perceives through a romanticised lens. In relation to female mental illness, this lens became particularly distinct with the rise of the Tumblr 'sad girl' in the 2010s. In 2015, i-D introduced the term 'sad girl':

Sad girls are young women, likely in affluent Western countries, who spend time online and embody a particular paradox: the desire to express their deepest interior feelings through an aesthetic many consider formulaic (Hines, 2015).

Tumblr is a reblogging social media platform, however unlike Facebook and Instagram most users do not use their own names, creating an element of anonymity. Because of this, many users, particularly young women, began to share posts relating to personal struggles such as mental illness, and the sad girl became an identity available for users to inhabit (Thelandersson, 2018). With the highly aestheticised nature of the site, the images shared were visually appealing to young girls. Images of beautiful crying girls, pink sparkling pills and even 'thinspiration' posts promoting eating disorders such as anorexia flooded the site (Fig 4). Effy Stonem became the 'it girl' of the Tumblr sad girl profile, with black and white images of her seductively smoking a cigarette with teary black makeup smudged under her eyes (Fig 5). Although some of the young women reblogging these 'sad girl' posts may have been suffering with mental illness, these images of depression, anxiety and anorexia create a hugely false and romanticised picture of mental illnesses, one that fabricates an appeal to sadness. The character of Effy Stonem significantly promotes this romanticised representation of mental illness. Her storylines glamorise mental health problems as something that will make boys fall in love with you. Her depiction of mental health is mostly based around a fanatical perception in which mental problems make you increasingly attractive (Bach, 2016).



Fig 4



Fig 5

Mitski reveals this aestheticised depiction of female suffering in 'Last Words of a Shooting Star', when she sings:

I always wanted to die clean
and pretty (Laycock, 2014).

The use of the word 'pretty' in the relation to death is reminiscent of the eroticisation of the dead woman through the male gaze. However, 'pretty' has no sexual connotations, but rather

a more delicate and romantic undertone. Mitski conveys a romanticised image of her corpse as a beautiful and attractive sight. The romanticisation of mental illness and the 'sad girl' aesthetic can work to encourage girls to rest in their sadness in order to identify as a sad subject; it implies a refusal of psychiatric models that aim to cure mental illness and restore them to healthy subjects as soon as possible. (Thelandersson, 2018, pg 13).

The works of some female artists do, however, successfully disregard the male gaze entirely, in their radical, and often raw, representation of female mental illness. The approaches of these artists are different in that they ignore the heteronormative gaze entirely, and in doing so, create works without the patriarchal and aestheticised portrayal of women seen through both the male gaze and the corresponding female gaze. This separate female lens dismisses the assumption that man serves as the viewer, and woman as the object to be viewed, and thus works to dismantle the hierarchy of normative perspective in art and media. Exhibiting many radical feminist ideologies, I will thus be referring to this lens as the radical female gaze in this essay. Radical feminism's dismantling of gender roles entirely by attempting to move beyond critique of male domination and enabling women to envision methods of ending the patriarchal construction of society (V.Ward, 1995, pg 871) is necessary when creating an unrefined narrative of female suffering. Tracey Enim's 'My Bed' (1998) displays female mental illness without the presence of the body at all, reflecting the grim corollary of a breakdown through the de-aestheticised image of her bed (Fig 6). Rebecca Mead writes for the New Yorker, "a bed without a body, it was nonetheless a naked self portrait" (Mead, 2015). Consisting of a used tampon, soiled tissues, empty vodka bottles, a used condom and underwear stained with menstrual blood, the work displays sex, suffering and femininity without the spectacle of the female body. This unattractive semblance of female mental

illness was shocking, and the complete disdain of the male viewer is perhaps what made it so.

Reflecting on the work in an interview with Yale British Art, Enim says:

I didn't go, this will shock them... It was tragically sad. I nearly died in that bed. I was feeling so suicidal. It was like the end of everything for me... It's about a capture of time for women, women immemorial... what it represents is time as a woman (Enim, 2022).

'My Bed' is a crude presentation of female mental illness and potential suicide through the radical female gaze, it is inconsiderate of feminine ideals. It stands in complete juxtaposition to 'Last Words of a Shooting Star' where Mitski reveals her relief that she had left her room tidy before her death. The radical female gaze ignores the heteronormative lens, gender roles and the conditioned female gaze, it demands narrative justice, it reasserts control over co-opted stories (Larkin, 2020).



Fig 6

Whilst the radical female gaze works to disembody the traditional phallogentric lens by discounting gender roles, the queer gaze challenges the entire belief of bodied genders and, therefore, is in complete opposition to both the male and the female gaze; which are both built upon the objectification of the female body, established from a phallic depreciation.

Molly Moss pronounces the queer gaze as a deconstruction of gender-based power dynamics, changing not only the object but also the intent of the male and female gaze. (Moss, 2019)

Through the queer gaze, the woman is neither the viewer nor the viewed, rather she serves as a fragment in a fluid non-gendered perspective. With the dismissal of phallogentric gender models, the woman cannot serve as the supplementary human form availed for male fulfilment and spectacle. As gendered bodies are dismissed, female mental illness is separated from the traditional female form, and since much of scientific literature perceived women as an abnormal man (Higgonnet, 1985, pg 105), the link between her genetic defect and suicidal illness is no longer valid.

CONCLUSION

The prolific representations of the eroticised and romanticised dead woman throughout history, and in contemporary media, is reflective of the patriarchal ideal of the submissive woman, and a presentation of male gratification with regard to feminine struggle. I have found that the male gaze serves as an indoctrination of phallogentric ideology, and an instrument towards female suppression, where women serve as the viewed spectacle for the masculine viewer. The dead woman remains young and beautiful forever, she is silently subjective, her power dissipates and she is reverted to an object for male fulfillment and fantasy. The narrative that women live for love, whilst man lives for himself (Higgonnet, 1985, pg 108), is important in the position of women in both historical and contemporary societies, who have been fed the romance trope in order to repress their position within the patriarchy, whilst obtaining their secondary gendered standing through the male gaze as sensitised and dependant supplementary beings. Female suicide is not considered a female concern, but instead subjected back to male dominance, as a display of broken romantic relations or unrequited desires. The condition of hysteria, which was said to be generated by

either sexual repression or magnified erotic desire, created a strong relationship between female sexuality and madness, and aided in the eroticisation of mentally ill women (Showalter, 2016). However, I have observed a specific feature of the contemporary fetishisation of mental illness which excludes women who do not correspond to the standard beauty ideals, therefore, entirely dismissing the experiences of the majority of women. This is another example where Eurocentric beauty ideals are perpetuated, with almost 80% of the female celebrities who openly spoke about their mental struggles from 2008 to 2015 being white (Thelandersson, 2023, pg 104).

Although the corresponding female gaze is different to the misogynistic characteristics of the male gaze, it is not entirely unique in nature. Formulated in a male dominated society, the female gaze, therefore, subconsciously reflects many aspects and desires of the male gaze, the woman acts as both the viewer and the viewed, there is a male viewer inside of her (Berger, 1972, pg 47). Due to this internalised male gaze and the romance trope, which proposes a romantic relationship as a safe space for girls to escape the threats of man, whilst continuing to suppress them as the submissive reliant gender, female desire can be largely affiliated to the need to be desired by others. This romance trope may also be indicative of the romanticising tendencies of the female gaze, and the aestheticisation of mental illness as something that may make you more attractive and desirable. However, as this study has illustrated there are counter examples where the radical female gaze completely rejects male desire and expectation of the objectified female image, by depicting shockingly raw displays of female suffering, and dismantles the gendered viewing roles of artwork. Furthermore, the queer gaze, which does not recognise gendered bodies, separates female mental illness from the female form, therefore it loses its ability to be eroticised entirely.

The evolving relationship between the female body and the representation of female suicide and mental illness in art and media, from a historical and contemporary perspective, provides an insight into the power of heteronormative masculinity in shaping female identities.

Despite, feminist critiques there remain many such examples, which continue to permeate art, media and our wider society. This study illustrates that while there are contesting perspectives, the depth of influence of male gender ideation is exceptionally pervasive. The counter perspectives emanating from radical female and queer artists provides a lens which is not only valuable but essential in addressing the social construction and dominant discourse on female identity.

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