

Introduction

Mirrors and Mirages: Women's Gaze in Hispanic Literature and Visual Arts

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Jacques Lacan's theories on the human gaze have been instrumental for the understanding of the construction of subjectivity as well as the dynamics between gender social roles, identity and women's representations of themselves. By the same token, such theories have proven to be an important contribution to the field of contemporary feminist criticism, setting out the basic tenets of the ongoing critical debates regarding the role of language, discourse, and visual representation in the performance of femininity and masculinity. Departing from Freud's psychoanalytic theory, Lacan states that gaze is crucial for human psychosexual development since, through the act of gazing, individuals are able to establish the primordial recognition of one's self (1977). The subject's entrance into the social order, according to the French psychoanalyst, takes place between the ages of six and eighteen months, during the so-called "mirror stage;" a phase when the child is able to recognize and identify his/her own image in the mirror ([1966] 2006). According to this scholar, the recognition of the self as other –different from the mother's body and external objects– becomes a defining point in the formation of subjectivity; it precedes the entrance into language and the symbolic order governed by the acceptance of the laws and conventions of phallogocentrism. Lacan argues that due to anatomical differences, however, the entrance to the realm of the symbolic is different for the male and the female child. While the male, fearing castration (castration complex), represses his sexual urges towards his mother (Oedipus complex) and gives into the rules and conventions of society, the female –upon seeing herself as already castrated– seeks to overcome and compensate her lack through marriage and motherhood. As Laura Mulvey posits in her study of visual pleasure and cinema narratives, "The paradox of phallogocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to the world... Women's desire is subjugated to her image of the bleeding wound; she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it" (432). The pleasure of looking (coined in the Greek term "scopophilia" and derived from Freud's "schauenlust" to refer to the desire of watching), as well as the dynamics of perception/misperception, recognition/misrecognition and identity, play a significant role in the constitution of ego. Nonetheless, as Mulvey suggests, such fascination with the human form creates a world ordered by sexual imbalance where female subjects become passive objects of male erotic desire, contemplation and consumption. Within the cinematic discourse, Mulvey notes that men are the "bearers of the look," actively controlling both the narrative and the fantasy, making things happen; while women, in their iconic and exhibitionist role, stand as passive erotic objects for the visual pleasure of the characters in the film and the spectators in the auditorium. In fact, Mulvey believes that there is no such thing as a feminine gaze since, at a very early age, women are taught to look at themselves and to construct their own identity through the masculine point of view (437). In her 1974 *Spéculum de l'autre femme*, Luce Irigaray notes that "oculocentrism," the privilege of sight over the other senses, supports and reinforces the phallogocentric discourse to the extent that every theory of the subject has been appropriated by and formed to accommodate patriarchal systems and laws. As it is the "eye what decides what it is and what it isn't," the woman resides outside representation; she is the male specular reflection, she is the Other, "absence, negativity, the dark continent, or at best a lesser man" (cited in Moi 132).¹

The purpose of this brief critical analysis is to underscore the materiality of the gaze in the construction of sexuality and gender as elements of women's representation built by others and also by themselves. While the groundwork of postmodern feminist theorists has been highly influential in establishing the basis of a critical discourse as political strategy, the influence of the male centered gaze in the representation of the female form and the construct of femininity still needs to be further addressed. The collection of essays gathered in this volume seeks to fill that void by exploring the ways in which visual and literary expressions of Spanish and Latin American women authors/artists have challenged the voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms referred to by Mulvey. Among these individuals, we find women artists and writers who used art and writing as a gateway to self-discovery or to leave an imprint in their social, historical and political world. The essays in this special issue pay attention to women's gazes that place them as agents of sight rather than passive object of visual consumption by others.

Feminist literary criticism has a significant role to play in the redistribution of power structures both inside and outside academia, since it provides the lens through which to understand "how power circulates around the axis of not just gender, but sexuality, race, and class" (Dolan 1). All essays collected here focus on the works of authors and artists whose discourse and aesthetics not only contest the question of gender and the subordination of women, but also expose the systems of domination, colonization, and racism in place to suppress the feminine experience and expression. As a whole, the volume presents a wide range of theoretical perspectives from North American, European, and Latin American critics, thus offering different approaches and epistemologies for the implementation of a politically engaged critique on the topic/construct of feminine subjectivity and the relevance of gaze as a way of knowing and a channel to build (self) representations.

In "Artemisia Gentileschi y Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Autorretratos o el arte de controlar las miradas," Leticia Chirinos examines the ways in which the Baroque Italian artist and the Mexican nun and Baroque writer used the self-portrait to gain visual agency and subvert conventional depictions of women and femininity in their times. According to Chirinos, the visual as well as the literary representations of Artemisia and Sor Juana epitomize Horatio's term *ut pictura poesis* ("as is painting so is poetry") in their rendition of the reciprocal correspondence between arts and letters. Addressing Artemisia's appropriation of Baroque techniques and composition to create her renowned "Self-portrait as the Allegory of Painting" (*La Pittura*, 1630), the essay analyzes the feminine themes present on the artist's masterpiece and the bold representation/rendition of herself as an active agent of sight. "The Allegory of Painting" as portrayed by Artemisia not only proves that she is an artist in her own right, but also challenges the norm dictating that symbolic depictions of the art of painting should be represented by an allegorical female, as opposed to a real one. Likewise, Sor Juana's famed poem "To Her Portrait" (*A su retrato*), refashions visual representations of her own image, and in so doing, reconfigures the relationship between feminine beauty and intelligence. As a gifted poet and scholar in seventeenth-century Mexico, Sor Juana sought to defend the autonomy of her craft by creating a portrait of herself that would redirect the external gaze towards the internal beauty of the intellect and the soul. Upon comparing the self-portraits of these notable women, Chirinos concludes that both used their portraiture not only as a performance strategy to gain recognition for their talent and their genius within the artistic fields dominated by men, but to a greater degree to construct alternative frameworks and outlooks for their own artistic vision.

The question of representation and perspective is also central to Elena Lindholm Narváez's essay "Perspectivismo republicano en *Mis viajes por Europa* de Carmen de Burgos." Under the pseudonym of "Colombine," the prolific journalist and writer incarnated the image of modern Spanish woman in the early decades of the twentieth century. While her works did not openly

challenge the traditional role of women in society, they took a first step in bringing to the forefront controversial issues such as marriage, divorce and feminine suffrage. According to Lindholm Narvaez, de Burgos, like many other women writers of the vanguard movement, incorporated many of the philosophical and aesthetic elements associated with male intellectuals of her generation. She also shared with her contemporaries a profound interest to place Spain up to par with the modernization process that was taking place in the rest of Europe. Inspired by José Ortega y Gasset's theory of perspectivism, in *Mis viajes por Europa*, de Burgos employs visual and spatial perspective—depth, size, and distance—to chronicle her impressions of the customs and traditions of Switzerland and Scandinavian countries at the break of the First World War in 1914. Her critical eye/I scrutinizes the political and social European landscape from the position of an informed social critic, but also from the point of view of a Republican female observant. Such positioning enables the author to cross transnational boundaries and deconstruct binary oppositions (passive/active, private/domestic) thus gaining her a voice amongst the most influential writers of her generation.

In similar fashion to women writers and observers like de Burgos, avant-garde female writers in Latin America embraced new forms of art and writing that eventually would allow them to question the conventions and mores surrounding the intellectual capacity of women to produce artistic and intellectual work. In “Norah Lange’s Unhomely Homes,” Marta Sierra studies Lange’s subversive narrative techniques to undermine the pervasive notions of femininity and challenge the avant-garde construct of the female body as an erotic object of masculine desire. Lange’s works draw attention to the relationship between a woman’s space and her creativity. In her narratives, the home becomes a site of experimentation and artistic search, a private place in which to echo the public debates on gender equality and refashion the politics of domesticity. Through the allegorical representation of the domestic space as a site of feminine restraint and confinement, Lange builds a powerful argument for gender equality and the rights of women to engage as legitimate citizens in the historical process of the nation in the aesthetic innovations brought by the culture of modernity. In the line of questioning official historical narratives about Latin America, Elvira Sánchez-Blake introduces another exegesis of the female gaze in “La mirada de la locura: Naves, manicomios y delirantes en las letras femeninas latinoamericanas.” Her essay explores *La nave de los locos* by Cristina Peri Rossi, *Nadie me verá llorar* by Cristina Rivera Garza and *Delirio* by Laura Restrepo, three novels in which the irrationality of madness serves as a springboard to render a counter-discourse to the official historiographies. The gaze of the madwoman introduces a disorder, a distorted version of reality that questions socially accepted norms of behavior. One of the outcomes of this gaze that distorts and disorders a reality that has been organized by patriarchal principles, uncovers a crisis of meaning and produces an alternative point of view that raises the critical consciousness of society, revealing the true chaos and madness behind the governing power structures. Departing from studies in cultural anthropology in which madness is regarded as a different way of seeing and perceiving the world, Sánchez-Blake finds, in the irrational behavior of the female characters and in femininity, a potential mechanism to disrupt hegemonic systems of oppression and marginalization. The female gaze, madness, and literature, like a convex mirror, allow “otherness” to speak, to disrupt basic assumptions of social conduct as well as the dominant systems of political and economical control that have influenced and molded the individual subject.

The theme of visual distortions is also addressed in Kathleen Doyle’s “Killer Looks: Ana María Moix’s *Las virtudes peligrosas*.” Moix’s story plays with visual and narrative perspective, as a male narrator whose identity is unknown until the tale’s end confronts a silent narratee named Alice, urging her to re-view strange events and impressions associated with the two elderly women whom she regularly visited as a girl. The narrator’s insider knowledge is informed by his voyeuristic activities and readings of his father’s journal, which details the decorated military leader’s frustration and

obsession with his wife's relationship with another woman. His rage and impotence in the domestic realm eventually culminate in his insanity and death, while the two women addressed in his writings try to cut the patriarchal ties that bind them within respectable society. Objects such as opera glasses, binoculars, mirrors and portraits figure prominently, and become the tools with which the two women Most striking are two portraits painted by the narrator as a young artist, one of his mother, and one of her true love. These works are displayed facing one another, gazes interlocked, maintaining a visual connection through art long after the women themselves have supposedly lost their ability to gaze at one another. Spying, searching, reading, and gazing are activities central to the women's story, which is organized and interpreted by a male narrator whose limitations as a reader (of both texts and contexts) are apparent to more analytical eyes who can read between the lines. In addition to the central discussion of disruptive power of the female gaze in the tale, Doyle's analysis explores how breaking with traditional spatial and narrative conventions creates an alternative, private space for the women to occupy, in full view of (yet simultaneously invisible to) the public eye untrained to see and interpret their relationship.

The different possibilities of women's gaze and their changes over time are explored in Rocío Quispe-Agnoli's essay on the construction of the fictional historical protagonist in Isabel Allende's novel *Inés del alma mía*. Quispe-Agnoli looks at this narrative as an example that combines the mimicry of travel literature and woman's fictional autobiography in Hispanic letters. In travel literature, the traveler's journey beyond the limits of his/her own world introduces his/her personal experiences about other places and peoples while building representations of otherness. In this way, and through a process initiated by the traveler's gaze, the main character in this novel becomes a mediator between peoples, places and cultures. To understand this mediation, this essay explores the ways in which the woman's gaze is displayed as tool for knowledge and as a platform to construct representations of the unknown. In order to deconstruct this female gaze, Quispe-Agnoli's study pays attention to the woman's visual experience in at least three possible scenarios: her eyewitness experience of new lands and peoples; her sensual gaze of individuals who become objects of attention and desire, and her feminine way of looking at other women combined with her gaze about herself which also encompasses her necessity to write her life. The conclusion contends that the reflective gaze of the novel's main character in a mirror reveals her ever-changing nature throughout life and the multiple versions of her identity that cannot be easily fixated as one and unique as it has happened in the historiography of the Spanish conquest of Chile. The fluid nature of woman's gaze in Hispanic letters is also the point of departure in Sohyun Lee's "(Re)vision paródica del misticismo: la mirada irreverente en *Entre todas la mujeres* de Isabel Franc." This essay analyzes the playful and parodic articulation of Christian mysticism in the versatile woman's gaze in Franc's novel which offers an alternative version of Bernardette Subirous's miraculous experiences with the apparitions of Virgin Mary in Lourdes, France, in the mid-1800s. The female narrator of the novel introduces herself as a reincarnation of the visionary Bernardette whose experiences with images of Virgin Mary have actual associations with visual experiences of her daily life and imagination. In her reinterpretation of Bernardette's spiritual gift, the narrator plays with the convention of mystic literature to talk about these supernatural events from a different point of view. Such point of view reveals a homosexual erotic gaze of the apparent spiritual communion between two female figures.

The final essay of this special issue on women's gaze in Hispanic literature and visual arts brings us to the exploration of this topic in performance arts and cinema. María Claudia André's "La mirada femenina y el discurso del poder en "La voz de los pañuelos" e "H.I.J.O.S: el alma en dos" de Carmen Guarini" studies the narrative structures and strategies of representation in contemporary documentary film making and their impact in the reproduction of potential female gazes. Departing from postmodern feminist approaches to visual arts and Michel Foucault's reflection on the

construction and circulation of discourses of power, André studies documentaries directed between 1992 and 2002 by Argentine filmmaker Carmen Guarini about women's reactions in Argentina in the aftermath of the military dictatorship (1972-1983) and their initiatives to denounce the disappearance of their loved and recover their stories for the historical memory of their nation. Her essay reveals Guarini's version of these women's gazes in contrast to the persistent relevance of the male gaze in the formation of "female subjectivities" that do not correspond to their actual voices.

The visual image that is displayed in the cover of this special issue anticipates the main subject of the studies and their final remarks. The photograph has been a collaboration between a concept by Rocío Quispe-Agnoli on distorted images in mirrors, mirages and woman's gaze as agent of sight, and the photographic and design production skills of graphic artist Stephen M. Kachmar to whom we are gratefully indebted. Finally, we have chosen to close this special issue with a contemporary example of a woman's gaze of her surroundings and herself in twenty first-century blog literature with Daniela Gutiérrez's short fiction "Reflejo," which is also briefly but brightly commented by José Santos in "Muerte y regeneración del ser en la mirada." We hope that the reader will find this last piece as a prime example of female subjectivity and construction of self-representation from the point of view of an inquisitive woman's gaze at herself in the surface of a mirror-like object in Mexico's daily life. The potential images of the resultant reflection may be perceived as distorted reflections or mirages of an individual discovering herself in unexpected ways. Women's gaze, in our opinion, is a crucial theme and component in Hispanic literature and visual and performance arts, which ought to be looked at from multiple perspectives, including the ways women look at them with and without the mediation of other gazes.

Notes

¹ Toril Moi makes reference to Irigaray's deconstruction of the Freudian theory of sexual difference based on the visibility of the male and female organs. When looking at women, Freud sees nothing (just the lack of penis); consequentially, women are the negative of the male norm, a negative of his own reflection. "In patriarchal culture the feminine *as such* is repressed; it returns only in its 'acceptable' form as the man's specularized Other. As the example of Oedipus demonstrates, the fear of blindness is the fear of castration. As long as the master's scopophilia remains satisfied, his domination is secure. No wonder that the girl's *rien à voir* (nothing to be seen)." (134).

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