Consider Loy's Exploration of the Gaze in her novel *Insel*

A 1930s novel who's female narrative focuses intently on a male in often deconstructing and sexualising ways - Loy's *Insel*[1] is radical in its exploration of the gaze and the female gazer. The narrative observations of Mrs Jones extend beyond normative ways of seeing: in terms of gender, physicality and aesthetics. Loy's/Jones' unique gaze is unleashed from constructs, entering regions that lie deep in our subconscious.

Mrs Jones' highly perceptual narrative observes protagonist Insel with a gaze that transcends a physical realm. As she gazes beyond normative boundaries of the visual and bodily, the aesthetics of the regard are re-defined as an otherworldly aura about Insel is revealed.

> "I should have preferred," he said with his voice of dead lovers crying through the earth, "to be fit for you to look at." Then he deliberately set himself on fire. […] Shaken with an unearthly anxiety, this creature of so divine a degradation, set upon himself with his queer hands and began to pull off his face.'
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> p. 76-77

This intense vision deconstructs Insel's physical body as he destroys and strips himself of his flesh. The absurdist imagery ('began to pull of his face') and hyperbolic grandiose prose ('voice of dead lovers crying through the earth'; 'unearthly anxiety'; 'divine a degradation') peel away reality and the material world, shifting towards a region of profundity. The gaze has the ability to disembody; surrealistically moving beyond conventionality to paradoxically convey an ineffable quality about Insel who seems to exist somewhere most of us cannot see.

That is not to say that Loy dismisses the physical body of Insel, at times focusing on it, revealing the polarity to Loy's gaze in her re-defining regard of the body. Indeed, the narrator is often drawn to Insel's repulsive physicality, particularly in his naked form. 'I'm so ugly naked' Insel

[1] Mina Loy, *Insel*, (New York: Melville House Publishing, 1991). All further references refer to this edition.

despairs, 'and it frightens the women […] all women are terrified of me (p. 36)'. He reveals himself to her, as a 'half-rotten looking man of flesh' (p. 38). Insel is now degraded to his bodily core, biological syntax dubbing him a 'man of flesh'. At one time an unearthly, ethereal spirit, then a viscerally fleshy organism, Insel's form fluctuates polarly. Or rather, Jones' gaze bears no bounds in her perception of Insel. Here, the intent focus of the gaze on Insel's abhorrent physique challenges the aesthetics of the normative gaze. Subverting the conventions of the nude, Loy disregards the aesthetics of beauty and youth for aesthetics of disgust, blowing out of the water Kant's argument that the mind of woman was limited to an affinity for the charming or the beautiful[2]. Jones is paradoxically both repulsed and drawn to the 'half-rotten looking man of flesh'. This is not dissimilar to Insel hideously pulling off his face of 'so divine a degradation'. Insel is stripped to his flesh and bones yet elevated to celestial heights under the ceaseless gaze.

Loy equally contests gender constructs here. Drawing on the extensive tradition of the male gaze and female nudes in European art, John Berger relates that in the genesis story 'nakedness was created in the mind of the beholder […] the woman is blamed and is punished by being made subservient […] she is not naked as she is. She is naked as the spectator sees her'[3]. Loy radically reverses this socially engrained troupe - Insel views himself as women see him. His vulnerable nakedness is at the mercy of the eye of the female beholder - 'all women are terrified of me'.

As with this scrutinization of Insel's nude form, Jones' narrative often inhabits a conventionally masculine realm of seeing. We must firstly ask, is Loy appropriating or challenging the male gaze? Laura Mulvey, coiner of 'the male gaze', notes the ease of 'trans-sex identification'[4]

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[2] Kant, summarised by Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics: an Introduction (*New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 133.
[3] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 48-50.
[4] Laura Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 15(1981), 12-15 (p. 13).

and 'masculine identification'[5] for women, given the subconscious prominence of the male perspective. Narrating Insel in a highly observant and often sexualised manner may seem like appropriation of the gaze, but is itself symbolic of a feminine claim to social and sexual power, radical for its time. Lorraine Gamman occupies this strand of thought, arguing that 'the female gaze cohabits the space occupied by men, not appropriating the voyeurism of the male gaze but disrupting its phallocentric power'[6]. On the other hand, this 'female gaze' abides to the very patriarchal structures it attempts to attack. Loy's complex writing moves further beyond a 'co-habitation' of the male gaze as Loy takes on hyper-sexualised phallic language and displaces its erotic aspect in an act of deconstruction. 'I definitely penetrated (into) his mediumistic world' (p. 97), Jones says, as well as, 'it was only when both his eyes were fixed upon me – I entered his Edenic region of unreasoning bliss to sway among immaterial algae' (p. 50). Drawing attention to herself as the active agent, 'I definitely penetrated', 'I entered', she parodies the sexual act in the male role. While much gaze criticism defines women in such terms as Doane's argument that 'woman can only mimic man's relation to language, that is assume a position defined by the penis-phallus as the supreme arbiter of lack'[7], Loy rejects such a notion. Notwithstanding the assigned role of 'supreme arbiter of lack', she owns rather than mimics masculine language. And she owns the language on her own terms, refusing to sexually objectify the subject of her gaze, instead moving beyond the bodily and objective conventions of the sexual act to something abstract. His 'mediumistic world' and 'Edenic region', a part of Insel's aura, are entered through her penetrating

[5]Ibid., p.15.

[6] Gamman, Lorraine (1989), "Watching the Detectives: The Enigma of the Female Gaze", in *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*, Ed. By Lorraine Gamman, Lorraine and Margaret Marshment (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1988), pp 8-60, (p. 16).

[7] Mary Doane quoted by Bell Hooks, The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators, in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, Ed. by Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 94-105, (p.101).

observation. As explored, the gaze is often beyond-the-body in this novel. As when Insel 'began to pull off his face', a sexualised chord is struck as he reveals himself, but rather than baring his naked body, he uncovers some incorporeal element of his being. Insel and Jones' sexually unsexual relationship, unbound from the margins of normal sexual relations, is one that drives the novel. The erotic nature of the gaze is thus repeatedly displaced and relocated in ineffable regions.

Elements of the narrative verge on voyeuristic, further occupying the male domain. In a further hint of her atypical sexual attraction to Insel, Jones regards Insel –

'he seemed to be sodden with some ineffable satisfaction, as If emerged drenched from some luxuriance requiring little tangible for its consummation. I had to hold myself in check. My charmed curiosity wanted to cry, "from what enchanted bed of love have you so lately arisen? What astral Venus has just receded from your embrace?"'

p. 34.

The pace and tone of this observance of Insel's absurd sexual relations is charged with sexual appetite, the narrative thus verging on scopophilia. This voyeuristic sentiment is later echoed, 'I could watch over my invalid through a pane of glass incompletely covered by a curtain on the door at the far end of the studio' (p. 81), as Jones obscures herself behind a half-concealed section of glass, perfecting the 'peeping Tom'. But, as is consistent throughout *Insel*, no sexual intimacy ever occurs. And like Insel's sexual relations with gods here, sexuality enters a Surrealist territory. The male gaze is appropriated but obscured and almost satirized, used for its respectable power rather than sexual domination.

In revealing the agency and power of the female perspective (emphasis on female perspective not 'female gaze'), Loy challenges patriarchal dominance. Jones notes 'some infrared or there invisible ray he [Insel] gave off, was immediately transferred on one's neural current to some dark room in the brain for instantaneous development in all its brilliancy' (p. 77). Insel's aura abounds in the 'rays' or *Stralhen* he gives off, yet significantly, it is the female spectator's role in

bringing the images to 'development' which is crucial. Camera imagery here is not an isolated occurrence in the text, resonating with the changing notions of perspective that came about with its invention. Berger notes that 'with the invention of the camera everything changed', no longer 'centred on the eye of the beholder', the camera 'shows you a world differently'[8]. This shift from phallocentric perspectives to a more universal one parallels an ascendance of the feminine viewpoint, as the male gaze began to come under scrutiny.

And while Jones' look may consistently focus on Insel, deciphering his *Strahlen,* her gaze is also demonstrated to have transformative power. A tête-à-tête of dominance and submission to Insel and Jones' respective gazes is present in the narrative. At one point Jones notes that 'under his conjugative power of projecting images, I felt myself grow to the ruby proportions of a colossal beef steak'(p. 34) while at another Insel 'twitched away from my fingers with the acid sneer of a wounded feline' (p. 46). Later Insel is depicted as 'an alcoholic preserving a foetal monster he resembled in repose' (p. 81). His grotesque surrealist foetal image reminiscent of the debt all men owe to feminine maternal power. Loy's absurd imagery plays a role in illustrating the transformative power of Jones', as well as Insel's, gaze as it belittles and transforms.

Deconstructing gender essentialism, Loy uses the gaze to cast out the prominent notion of intellect as an inherently masculine-only trait. This gender debate is satirically poked fun at as Insel remarks, 'that at last the female brain might achieve an act of creation' (p. 20). You can almost feel Loy's eyes rolling to the back of her head as she writes a statement she must have heard so often. Ironically, the hyperbolically admired male artist and unrealised female artist is the very subject of this *female* artwork. This idea bears fruit at the end of the novel, its delayed revelation uncovering

[8] Episode 1, *Ways of Seeing*, (BBC 2, 1972), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pDE4VX_9Kk> accessed 17/04/20.

patriarchal insecurities at work in the female psyche (no matter how radical Jones' gaze). In a metatextual way, the novel itself functions as a greater artwork than anything Insel produces. It is Jones' biography of Insel, rather than Insel's painting, that is the completed artwork. Insel is the muse, Jones the artist.

And it is Jones' mindful gaze that is testament to her artistic, visionary powers. As Insel's power dissipates towards the end of the novel, it is exposed that he perhaps has no astounding aura, no affiliation to 'black-magic' (p. 5), only the visions of a drug addict. Thus, the construction and maintenance of his image lies with the prosaic power and surrealist perceptiveness of Jones' astounding narrative. She takes note of this herself under the last rays of his fading aura, 'had I recalled the earlier iridescent Insel, it could only have been as a figment of *my* insanity' (p. 146). Arnold notes 'her victory over his seductive aura and near violence'[9] by the novel's close. Arnold seems to miss the fact that the aura never really lay with Insel, rather, it was composed by Jones' mind. In her longing to say to Insel as she leaves him, "I have absorbed all your *Strahlen*" but 'I said nothing of the kind […] it was not true' (p. 154), she reveals that she can't absorb his *Strahlen* because it was never present. The true 'victory' is Jones' realisation of her own aura and genius.

While Jones' gaze is radical, the initial glorification of Insel to an extent relies on gendered constructs and perceptions: the admired and the admirer, Jones the gazer and Insel the profound artist . Only at the novel's conclusion is Insel 'noticing me [Jones] for the first time' (p. 153), revealing the endemic rigidity of the gazer/gazee structure. 'I shall probably find this quality [of Insel] exists only in my imagination' (p. 5), Jones surprisingly notes at the beginning of the text. Interestingly then, she holds an underlying awareness of her powerful imagination throughout, yet gender essentialism belittles her self-worth and artistic realisation. Such a transition in perceived

[9] Elizabeth Arnold, Afterword, Loy, *Insel*, pp. 169-176 (p. 175).

genius, from Insel to herself, sheds a light on inherent patriarchal power structures and challenges them. Parmar questions whether the novel sets up a rivalry of genius between the two main characters, noting 'Mrs Jones' fear, that secretly Insel believes he has greater generative power than her'[10]. Parmar's assumption of gender equality is optimistic, neglecting to realise the patriarchal powers that undermine Jones' initial confidence in her own abilities and lead her to intensely observe the male artist.

Thus, Loy takes the gaze and re-defines it: challenging bodily boundaries and conventional aesthetics of the gaze, occupying the male realm and displacing its erotic aspect; providing the gaze with feminine power and utilising it to uncover the female genius. This is powerful work in challenging normative, and typically male, ways of seeing. 'I saw his image grown suddenly faint, imploring the shadow of women' (p. 8), Jones regards at the beginning of the novel, self-aware of the patriarchy-smashing and female-empowering motions she is about to set to work in her narrative. She quite literally foreshadows her own eclipse of Insel's power. Towards the end of the novel, Insel is set against 'the rotten rose of an asphyxiated sunset, the skeleton phallus of the Eiffel Tower reared in the distance as slim as himself' (p. 111). It is hard not to read the 'skeleton phallus' as Loy's expose and asphyxiation of masculinity. Stripped to its core, patriarchal structures are questioned and displaced. While Kornitzer identifies the modern woman's generation as one that is 'intensely self-conscious'[11], i.e. aware of the patriarchal structures which define their existence, Loy does not embody such an identity. There is a strategic awareness in Jones' lack of self-awareness (by her focus on a male), she actively challenges and displaces gender constructs rather than just drawing attention to them. She breaks away from Berger's notion of the female

[10] Parmar, *Reading Mina Loy's Autobiographies: Myth of the Modern Woman* , p. 154.
[11] Kornitzer quoted by Sandeep Parmar, *Reading Mina Loy's Autobiographies: Myth of the Modern Women,* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.33.

awareness of always being seen as the primary gazer of this text. She radically re-structures the gaze. But, it is in Jones' delayed realisation of her imaginative gaze that patriarchal structures still linger.

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