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Curious spectatorship in the age of deepfakes

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ABSTRACT

On social media platforms, deepfakes commonly show users inserting their own faces into figures from the history of Hollywood film and visual culture while reduplicating a range of gender stereotypes to self-represent. This paper considers the resonances between deepfakes and the writing of feminist film theorist, Laura Mulvey on the male gaze and spectatorship. In particular, the paper looks at deepfake production from the framework of Mulvey's concept of 'curious spectatorship,' a term that describes a process of playful spectator interaction with new technologies to remix old filmic media which leads to decipherment of the screen. Moving between the theoretical and the personal, I consider how early and late arguments in Mulvey's writing anticipate deepfake practices. I argue that there is creative potential for deepfakes to revise patriarchal structures of looking in Hollywood film and offer a way to consider how new forms of subjectivity and self-perception are encouraged by playful interaction with figures on screen.

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Introduction

'Become Anyone!' is the by-line of a deepfake website, Reface, marketing its popular product: a deep learning application that enables users to replace the image of one face with another in photography or video to make them do or say fictional things.¹ On social media platforms, users post videos of themselves recast as celebrity figures to play digital dress up with bodies that either match, or don't match, their own gender, race, or age. It is not uncommon to find bearded men superimposing themselves into women's bodies, while other users of varying gender masquerade as iconic figures such as Marilyn Monroe, Audrey Hepburn or even Barbie.² With the potential to 'become anyone,' users replicate gender stereotypes that are played out in performances of

excessively masculine or feminine figures from the history of film and visual culture. Popular deepfake apps encourage users to transform star bodies into fetish objects of masquerade, building on the commodification of celebrities in the culture industry to associate with the mythic qualities they signify: elegance, glamour, masculinity *and so on*. In doing so, they make 'tensions' between the spectator *and* the screen visible in ways that resonate with older theories of cinema spectatorship, the male gaze and gender.³ Consideration of these resonances offers insight into the new forms of self-perception that are being generated by deepfakes.

Presciently, early film theorists such as Laura Mulvey (1975) and Christian Metz (1982) argued that viewing film involved the

projection of oneself into its diegetic world and an identification (or disidentification) with the characters on screen.⁴ This involved seeing oneself *as* the character and theorised to be the way spectators derived meaning and affect from film. Metz described it using the analogy of the mirror:

‘... film is like the mirror but it differs from the primordial mirror in one essential point: although, as in the latter, everything may come to be projected, there is one thing and one thing only that is never reflected in it: the spectator’s own body ... at every moment I am in the film by my look’s caress ...’ (1982, 45)

Laura Mulvey was the first theorist to recognise how this act was itself a gendered exercise. In her essay on the male gaze, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (hereafter as Visual Pleasure),⁵ she argued that in mainstream Hollywood film, the spectator was encouraged to identify with the main male protagonist and experience a masculinisation through this surrogate figure. Hollywood films presented the main protagonist as the powerful, active driving force of narrative film, while the female co-star had fewer lines and was there to be looked at. By identifying with the main male character, the spectator could experience visual pleasure through the mastery of the male gaze.⁶ Spectator identification, from Mulvey’s position, was cultivated by binary models of gender that positioned the active male subject in relation to a passive female object. In this model, female spectators were forced to look at women on-screen as objects to be desired, a position assumed to be ideologically internalised. Such a reading of identification and gendered cinema spectatorship offers ways of thinking *and working* through ‘the deepfake problem,’ (Gosse and Burkell 2020) which I will briefly address.

Deepfakes first appeared on the social media platform Reddit by users creating non-consensual pornography using the faces of cis-gendered female Hollywood stars, such as actress, Gal Gadot and sharing the algorithmic code

and training datasets with the intent of objectifying, and desecrating women (Cole 2017).⁷ However, the issue of non-consensual deepfake pornography was eclipsed in the media by bigger threats, such as political deepfakes, with news stories addressing the ‘deepfake problem’ in terms of the risk posed to objectivity, politics, and financial markets, with the most cited videos featuring government leaders being made to say things that they had not (Gosse and Burkell 2020). Deepfakes seemed to be the materialisation of fake news and fed the anxiety of knowing the truth, particularly during and after Trump’s presidency in the height of the post-truth era.⁸ While deepfakes could pose a range of epistemic threats to the public interest, the data has suggested a wider socio-cultural problem: of all the deepfakes generated in the years between 2017 and 2019, 96 percent were non-consensual pornography of women (Ajder et al. 2019).⁹ But instead of focussing on the way deepfakes continue to replicate power relations – in this case, the patriarchal gaze, the broader deepfake problem of truth, misinformation and democracy has received the most media attention (Gosse and Burkell 2020; Jacobsen and Simpson 2023).

For the scholars, Jacobson and Simpson, the media has helped to cultivate a ‘deepfake imaginary’ (2023) that manifests in the potential threat of deepfakes to *disrupt* without thinking about the way behaviour facilitated by the technology is shaped by socio-cultural contexts and dominant hegemonies. The political answer to the deepfake problem has been to develop systems to automate the algorithmic detection of deepfakes and ban their distribution, rather than thinking about the possibility that deepfakes are the product of assemblages of information that exist in *tension* to one another (2023). They suggest that we think through the ruptures and continuities generated by the technology:

‘... deepfakes have the potential to disrupt which, in turn, raises the question, what is

being obfuscated by this claim to disruption? Staying with the tensions of deepfakes is to remain attentive to their inherent plurality and multiplicity, how they constitute both ruptures as well as continuities in relation to broader societal issues such as gender, politics, and notions of objectivity.’ (2023, 4)

This observation is valuable when it comes to thinking about the contradictory ways in which deepfakes occupy various spaces of online culture. Thinking about tension and entanglement might help consider the differences and relationships *between* forms of creation with deepfakes: such as the cinephiles who playfully create user-generated deepfakes with stars’ bodies *and* the users who generate non-consensual pornographic deepfakes of women’s bodies . Further consideration of the ruptures and continuities between deepfakes and the feminist film theory of Laura Mulvey can offer a way of thinking about the deepfake problem in relation to the male gaze.

As relatively new phenomena, academic scholars in the humanities have argued that consideration of deepfakes would benefit from feminist frameworks and material perspectives to approach the technology (Wagner and Blewer 2019; Gosse and Burkell 2020), as well as considering the continuities between deepfakes and earlier forms of visual representation like photography and cinema (Bode, Golding, and Lees 2021; Holliday 2021). In this context, I suggest that creative engagement with the technology can offer a way of *showing, playing* and *making visible* the connections between deepfakes and older technologies of photography and film used to train deepfake algorithms and the social issues that existed long before them.

In my attempt to address the creative potential for deepfakes, I borrow a term from Laura Mulvey, a form of spectatorship that she sees as characterising the era of digital media: ‘curious spectatorship’.¹⁰ Curious spectators, Mulvey argues, evolve from pensive observation of

the screen. Driven by practice and a desire to remix the screen, the curious spectator engages in a process of experimentation that leads to a perception or decipherment of the screen. In other words, playing with older filmic media using newer forms of media can lead to an illumination of coded visual language, including gendered bodily gestures that are represented on the screen. The way in which deepfakes encourage play in the spectator through face replacement constitutes a form of curious spectatorship, and in this case, I argue, can lead to a visualisation, or disruption of the gaze.

In this paper, I don’t ignore the fact that deepfakes reiterate patriarchal power relations, but I am optimistic that creative practice can offer ways of thinking about their potential disruptions to the gaze, and *that* might lead to some critical awareness of the structures of looking that are perpetuated in the visual representation of ourselves and others. As such, there is the possibility for deepfake technology to elicit new forms of self-perception and reveal historical connections and ruptures with photographic theory, cinephile culture and gendered structures of looking and performing for the camera. It is one of few papers, if any, to consider how user-generated creative play with deepfakes may help users see and imagine how patriarchal power structures are perpetuated on the screen, leading to a destabilisation of structures of looking and being seen as a gendered other. It is to an account of deepfakes and spectatorship that I now briefly turn.

Approaches to rearranging heads (method)

A recent encounter led me to consider the implications that playing with deepfakes could have on the male gaze. Of all places, this occurred in my local dog park. An acquaintance of mine, Fred, a man in his late sixties with a pet chihuahua, had asked me to show him some examples of deepfakes which

we looked at on my smartphone. To begin, I presented him with a few videos of myself swapped into a range of bodily substitutes: Tippi Hedren, Yul Brynner, Sophia Loren (Figure 1) and Marilyn Monroe (Figure 2). The amusement piqued Fred's interest and he asked if his face could be swapped. So there in the dog park, among the chihuahuas and bull terriers, I held my camera to his face.

As an artist who has worked with photography for the last twenty years, I am aware of the way people behave when they are aware of the camera lens and run dry of learned gestures that enable performances for the camera: smiles, head tilts, chin juts, rearranging hair, contrived laughter, and so on. Fred was no exception. He did all the common things people do when they are self-conscious about being photographed, he froze awkwardly: his lips tensed, his eyes tightened. I took his photograph and uploaded it to a face swapping application on my phone. I asked him which Hollywood subject he wanted to be. With a few choices, he decided and in seconds, his face had been replaced into the figure of Robert Downey Jr as Tony Stark in *Iron Man* (2008). From still photograph, Fred's image had

become animated. His sparse grey hair replaced with Stark's brown cut and yet the deep lines of his ageing face are his own. He wears a dark suit that he rips off to reveal his body clad in muscular armature, he flies amidst explosions, intimidating smaller men. I showed him the video. He was unsettled by the incongruity of his heroic transformation and cast his eyes elsewhere. It was to my surprise that Fred then asked me to send the video to his wife: it was as though he had become a meme destined for transmission, perhaps even laughter. I sent the video and left the park thinking about Fred's response to his decapitated head fixed upon an unlikely surrogate.

The encounter between Fred, myself, and my handheld device – all situated in the dog park – attests to the ubiquitous nature of synthetic media and visual culture. I couldn't help but notice how our encounter revealed the impact of convergence technology on our everyday lives; in this scenario, visual media, film spectatorship, deepfakes, and social platforms had coalesced. This encounter was occurring outside of a darkened cinema theatre on a smartphone, and yet the idea of film, the identification with filmic archetypes was ever



Figure 1. Sara Oscar, As Sophia Loren in 'A Countess from Hong Kong', 2020.



Figure 2. Sara Oscar, As Marilyn in 'Gentlemen Prefer Blondes', 2020.

present in our play with deepfakes. In this respect, I considered our machinic experimentations to exist within a greater sphere of desire that extended to visual culture and filmic viewing habits. Such a way of considering deepfakes departs considerably from the ‘deepfake problem’: the potential disruption to democracy and truth.

By looking at user generated deepfakes as an extension of filmic culture and spectatorship outside of this media discourse, I am considering how visual media technology reinstates a framework of film theory and gender identity that can be seen and shared on social media platforms. For filmic spectators and deepfake enthusiasts who share their ‘face swaps’ with characters from film and popular culture, there are significant implications for spectatorship and the ‘male gaze’ when the photograph of a face, that is, a photographic ‘death mask’¹¹ becomes an object of play with film. To further pursue this claim, I return briefly to Laura Mulvey’s film spectator in her 1975 essay on the male gaze.

Laura Mulvey’s spectator identification and the male gaze

There is no text on the male gaze as widely disseminated and reproduced in feminism and visual culture as Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure* since its publication in 1975. The term ‘male gaze’ is referred to outside of filmic discourse and known in popular lexicon as a way of a looking at women through masculinist objectification, a position that is subsequently internalised by women and replicated on social networks. Having taught Mulvey to undergraduate students of photography over many years, my students have continued to find the discursive concept in the artefacts of visual culture, from the representation of the female form in music videos to contemporary Hollywood film making, to the poses and gestures adopted in female self-representation on social media platforms. My attempt to think about the way

in which curious spectatorship with deepfakes may be able to rupture these cycles of identification is what leads me back to rethink the dynamics of looking in Mulvey’s 1975 essay.

To reiterate the argument in *Visual Pleasure*, Mulvey’s core thesis is that the golden age of Hollywood film making encourages spectators to look from the perspective of the central male character, a point of view that is conveyed by camera angles, editing and narrative. Within this framework, the male figure is active, has dialogue and advances the storyline, while the female character is there to be looked at: she says little, she is beautiful to look at, she is well-dressed or undressed, narrative pauses when she is in the frame, the camera pans across her body, she performs her ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’.¹² This model of woman does not threaten the mastery of masculinity. A range of filmic examples attest to this model in Mulvey’s thinking. In *Rear Window* (1954), the character Jeffries, played by James Stewart, is the exemplary voyeuristic male; he is an ailing photographer with a broken leg who spends his days at home looking at the neighbours in the adjacent apartment block from his window. His female co-star, Lisa, played by Grace Kelly, is a fashion model whose profession is to be looked at. Jeffries has little romantic interest in Lisa until he sends her to investigate suspicious activity at the neighbours’ apartment block; it is only when he sees her from a distance, through his binoculars, that he falls in love with her. This distance activates his capacity to become voyeuristic. Everything about the editing and camera work in the film encourages the spectator to view the film from Jeffries’ position, Mulvey observes he is the spectator’s fantasy surrogate: we put ourselves into that role, we are encouraged to identify with Jeffries and objectify Lisa.¹³

In Mulvey’s argument the male gaze is underpinned by two psychoanalytic processes: objectification and identification. The first is based on the objectifying gaze of Sigmund Freud’s writing on scopophilia,¹⁴ meaning to

derive visual pleasure from sight without stimulation from other sensory mechanisms. The second process, most pertinent to spectator identification, comes from Jacques Lacan's theory of childhood development based on the mirror stage.¹⁵ For Lacan, the child who is still developing motor skills such as the ability to walk, encounters their mirror image in play and experiences a correlation between the virtual images of movement and reality.¹⁶ In play, the child realises that their gestures and actions exist independently of their caregiver: this occurs by way of an ongoing visual process of *recognising* and *misrecognising* their mirror image, a process that is subsequently internalised through a conglomerate of images that the child takes for themselves.¹⁷ This recognition is only ever partial however and sets off a lifelong but unattainable pursuit of wholeness and mastery achieved by the image of the other that is taken for the self.¹⁸

The mirror like process of recognition with false, ideal images is crucial to the spectator's identification with the masculine other on screen, leading to an imaginary, fantasy projection into the diegetic world of film. Mulvey describes it like this:

'... it is the birth of the long love affair/despair between image and self-image which has found such intensity of expression in film and such joyous recognition in the cinema audience... the cinema has distinguished itself in the production of ego ideals, through the star system for instance. Stars provide a focus or centre both to screen space and screen story where they act out a complex process of likeness and difference (the glamorous impersonates the ordinary).¹⁹

As Mulvey notes, the spectator's identification with the other on the screen is exacerbated by the star system of Hollywood production and the commodification of iconic stars who encourage identification with the masculine figure on the screen.

Several theorists have addressed the omission of other forms of spectatorship, from

female to nonbinary and non-white spectators who are not addressed in Mulvey's model of the male gaze. The feminist cultural theorist of film, Jackie Stacey has argued that what prevents Mulvey's model of the male gaze from ever escaping the binarism of masculine and feminine is the psychoanalytic framework that her model is based upon that generates two opposing modes of looking: an active, desiring masculine gaze or a passive feminine look.²⁰ Any attempt to consider female spectatorship therefore involves a transformation of the female gaze that is deemed unstable. This is made clear in a follow up essay where Mulvey addresses the topic of female spectator identification, she resolves that any active desire 'thrusts' the female into a fantasy of masculinisation.²¹ Thus the female spectator swings between the opposing ends of gender identification while the masculine spectator's identification is deemed stable. Critiques of Mulvey's model of the male gaze tend to focus on the meaning of sexual difference and pleasure in cinema spectatorship, and rely on the same theoretical, psychoanalytic model to reinterpret models of objectification and identification performed on the screen.²² This omits an integral factor: the assumed position of the cinema spectator, as Judith Halberstram notes, particularly those who have already accepted heteronormative role models before viewing a film in the first place.²³ How spectators identify with figures on screen, and what they do with figures on screen in terms of gender is especially visualised by the interactive nature of deepfake technology.

Spectator interactivity and the male gaze

Writing after *Visual Pleasure* and prompted by the transition of film from analogue media to digital technologies, Mulvey revisited her concept of the male gaze and the changing nature of film spectatorship. In *Death 24x A Second*:

On Stillness and the Moving Image (2008), Mulvey argued that digital media and the interactive nature of watching film outside of the cinema had generated different types of spectatorships that created implications for the male gaze. Digital interactivity could grant the spectator access to a plurality of gazes, particularly by being able to pause film on a central male figure rather than the female who is traditionally represented by a camera panning across her body in confirmation of her 'to-be-looked-at-ness'.²⁴ Mulvey believed this could grant the spectator control over the look of the camera, prompting forms of spectator interaction with film. Technological interactivity, she argued, could lead to 'play' with the image and render the structures of looking from the position of the male gaze an 'archaic concept'.²⁵

In Mulvey's claim, spectatorship is entangled with and shaped by technological changes. Whether patriarchal structures of looking continue to proliferate in the interactive age of visual culture, however, is unclear. The widespread employment of deepfakes to create masterful images of the female body, as elucidated earlier in the essay, is a clear indicator of the way in which digital interactivity is used in the service of a male gaze. While technological interactivity may open the spectator up to a variety of other gazes, spectators are still guided by heteronormative ways of seeing even though ways of looking and interacting with film depart from earlier forms of passive cinema spectatorship. In other words, there is a tenuous relationship between technological shifts such as interactivity and gender normative structures proliferated by the culture industry.

The male gaze, far from being an archaic concept, is a model of mastery that is enacted on face swapping programs and social media, reaffirming a patriarchal ideology that replicates actions and gestures of female passivity and masculinity that are produced and reproduced in visual culture. From this

perspective, the misogynistic play with images also occurs in remix culture through interactivity and technology, the very technology Mulvey sees as rendering the male gaze a historical concept. This suggests that investment in the power of interaction alone forecloses debates around the historical nature of the male gaze, without consideration for the role that spectator identification plays in this dynamic.

To this end, I tease out the concept of curious spectatorship and identification by looking to instances of user generated deepfakes that proliferate on the platforms of social media, as well as my own personal experiments with deepfake technology. My interest here is how the insertion of a spectator into film using deepfakes may function in the service of disrupting the male gaze when models of identification and disidentification are enacted. The relationship between the figure being swapped and the target, Hollywood film is central here due to the way the spectator sees themselves pictured as the surrogate on the screen. I move to tease out the relationship between identification and disidentification in the following sections.

Curious spectatorship: seeing differently

Curious spectatorship, for Laura Mulvey, occurs when a spectator is driven by a desire to play with film, to remix it. This she argues can facilitate decipherment, a way of looking at the screen and gendered structures of looking.²⁶ In her words:

Sometime after writing 'Visual Pleasure' I tried to evolve an alternative spectator, who was driven not by voyeurism, but by curiosity and the desire to decipher the screen ... This curious spectator may be the ancestor of the pensive spectator and the cinema of delay unlocks the pleasure of decipherment, not only for an elite but also *for anyone who has access to the new technologies of consumption.*

Of particular interest is *the relation between the old and the new*, that is the effect of new technologies on cinema that has now aged. ... *The delayed cinema makes visible its materiality and its aesthetic attributes, but also engages an element of play and of repetition compulsion.*²⁷

Decipherment in curious spectatorship, according to Mulvey, is initiated through an entanglement of two factors: an awareness of the materiality of film and its aesthetic attributes, and spectator play. The ‘mechanics of play’, Mulvey notes, can be traced back to childhood imaginative play with toys. It is characteristically repetitive and driven by a desire for happiness rather than haunting or death.²⁸ Play with film and or images creates an opportunity for different forms of looking to take place, offering creative potential to decode performances of sexuality that restate heteronormative structures within the patriarchal gaze. Play, in addition, leads to an awareness of the materiality of film – particularly its mirror like connection to realism including its temporal flow.

To take up and extend on the idea of the ‘curious spectator’ in the age of deepfake technology means thinking about what it means to interact with film when the spectator becomes part of the pictorial plane. Generated in the name of fun, or play, curious spectators can be led to visualise themselves as any figure on the screen, and in that process, reassign gender roles through the deepfake. In this light, curiosity is invoked by social media users who use their face to masquerade as a range of icons perpetuated by the Hollywood system and pop culture. Iconic figures of Hollywood cinema, archetypes who have historically represented surrogates for the spectator are algorithmically malleable, fantasy forms that spectators can picture themselves in, masking and unmasking themselves as other. Rather than being conceived theoretically, social media users, as spectators, leave their artefacts on platforms of the Internet, distributing and

filing their remixes under hashtags and search terms.

On the social platform, Tik Tok, users share their face swapping activities under the hashtag, Refaceapp that displays a total of 184.1 million views. Popular videos, those receiving between 17,000 and 250,000 likes, are accompanied by descriptions of intent on the videos of user content. Here are some examples:

so I put my face on celebs I’ve been told I look like²⁹

Mixing my face with Kylie Jenner³⁰

putting my face on celebs I get told I look like³¹

why am I hot tho³²

I put my face on Marilyn Monroe and I’m obsessed³³

if I was the main character pt2 bc im obsessed³⁴

Audrey hepburn 9/10, selena gomez gurllll 1000/10³⁵

Putting my face on Miley Cyrus to see if we look alike³⁶

As the captions suggest, users have chosen to swap their faces with glamorous celebrities to self-represent and distribute these videos for other users. In many cases, the user chooses the surrogate figure based on the perception that the user resembles that figure. In other cases, users select surrogate figures based on a perception that the figure on screen represents glamour, or a particular standard of beauty for the user. In these examples, users reaffirm their own hyper-femininity in a manner that is consistent with research undertaken in the field of psychology and media. In a study of women between the ages of 18–30, scholars Wu, Ma, and Zhang (2021) measured user responses to seeing their deepfaked image in celebrities of similar race, age and body shape based on two key measures: perceived self-image and

‘potential’ attractiveness. These instances reveal evidence of new forms of spectatorship and ways of manifesting self-image through the figure of the celebrity on screen. While the element of play appears to be harboured in a desire to play digital dress up, users replicate hegemonic structures of gender.

In other instances of deepfake play on social media platforms, there is a turn to disrupting the male gaze by confusing binary models of sexual identification between masculine and or feminine subjects. This is common practice among artist-content producers, such as New Zealand content producer, Jeffery White who uses the name, Dr Fakenstein. In one of his deepfakes, he uses the character Ron Swanston, a hyper-masculine government worker in the television show *Parks and Recreation* with an iconic moustache played by actor Nick Offerman. A remix of James Cameron’s *The Titanic* (1997), Swanston’s face is swapped onto Kate Winslet’s body in the iconic scene where Winslet appears to undress before Leonardo DiCaprio as Jack and asks to be drawn like ‘one of his French girls’ (Figure 3). In the original scene, Winslet wears nothing but a sheer black robe with a tasselled belt and leans up against a doorway, presenting herself to Jack the artist for the first time. She grasps her belt and swings it around seductively before moving in closer to disrobe herself, performing for Jack’s masculine gaze. In the remix, this gesture is rendered farcical by the placement of Swanston’s face onto the body of Winslet, the swirl of the tassels and the seductive gesture of undressing are underscored by the visual and algorithmic transformation of Winslet’s face into Swanston. When the camera pans to the ‘Frankenstein’ like deepfaked figure, the binary structures of the gaze, the models of active and passive forms of looking are illuminated to comedic effect: what is play in this instance is the transition between illusion and reality, visualised by what Christopher Holliday (2021) refers to as the problematic fit that is generated by a monstrous surface tension

which emerges from viewing the deepfaked body on the screen.

In cases of online deepfake production made by other artistic content creators, such as CTRL Shift Face or The Fakening, the decision to swap one star’s face with another constitutes allegorical play, based on what each ‘star’ and movie scene represent. It is the play of associations between each character that constitutes a form of aesthetic production: whether this be Ron Swanston’s face swapped with Kate Winslet, or Donald Trump’s face placed onto the body of a child beauty queen.³⁷ As the film theorist Tom Gunning notes, playing with digitally manipulated photographs can be delightful, and this is paradoxically based on ‘a continued investment in the photograph as potentially an accurate representation, causing a playful inversion of associations rather than simply cancelling them out.’³⁸ It is precisely this ‘playful inversion of associations’ that is generated in the acts of face swapping.³⁹ When social media users insert themselves into artefacts of visual culture, they inevitably transform and give light to pre-existing structures of gender performance: the more extreme the inversions, the greater the comedic effect. This underscores the false fixity of stereotypes by creating visual inconsistencies in gender, age and race between the spectator and the surrogate body.

Curious spectators who play with deepfakes engage in instances of digital mimicry are fuelled by a desire to visualise oneself as the other represented on screen. This involves the figure of the spectator entering the screen space: deepfakes highlight the way in which the spectator might identify, and see themselves in the other on screen, the voyeurism of cinema transforms into an awareness of the direction of the look. The spectator seeks themselves in the image of the other, the screen is penetrated, and the spectator is both seeing and seen. Therefore, when a spectator inserts themselves into a deepfake image of a character on screen, the distance between the spectator and screen is



Figure 3. Jeffery White as Dr Fakenstein, *Deepfake me like one of your French Girls*, <https://youtu.be/PU6rpeeZ1nQ>, accessed 16 December, 2021.

interrupted and brought into proximity. Entering the screen by synthetic means, the spectator

projects himself into the ‘screen surrogate’: a visible interpellation occurs transforming the screen into a surface of masks that visualises and, potentially, interrupts spectator identification. Either the spectator identifies, mildly identifies, strongly identifies, or disidentifies with the image of themselves on the screen and this is central to the disruptive tendencies of deepfake technology.



Figure 4. John Heartfield, *Benütze Foto als Waffe! (Use Photo As a Weapon!)*, 1929. Copyright: John Heartfield. VG Bild-Kunst/Copyright Agency, 2023.

Playing with death masks: self as other, self as viewer

The DADA and Surrealist movements of the early twentieth century mobilised the disruptive tendencies of the fragmented image long before synthetic media technology. Both movements understood the power of fragmentation and estrangement to shock the eye, as well as the traumatic effect that collage aesthetics could have on the viewer. In the work of DADA artists who employed collage techniques, the stitching together of found mass media images facilitated a way of rearranging the world and the signifying association of

particular images for the purposes of remixing. The photographic collage made by John Heartfield in 1929, *Benütze Foto als Waffe! (Use Photo As a Weapon!)* is pertinent here [Figure 4](#). In the collage Heartfield looks directly at the viewer and grasps Zörgiebel's head with two fingers while holding a pair of scissors in the hand to decapitate the head of police commissioner, executing him from his grey suit as he juts out from the bottom of the frame. Such a gesture resonates considerably with the object of deepfake technology with the decapitating and swapping of portraits of ourselves and others.

The art historian, Brigid Doherty has written of DADA montage:

... the capacity to induce trauma inheres specifically in the form of photomontage, where the beholder's traumatic experience is, so to speak, already embodied in the composite image of a figure whose parts do not match-where, to put it another way, traumatic shock is made visible in a fragmented body
...⁴⁰

The shock of representing the body as a fragmented entity is illustrated by Doherty drawing on a contemporary court case involving two office co-workers. In her description, one of the co-workers created a collaged pornographic image of the other co-worker, a woman running in a local union election campaign who received her 'portrait' in an envelope – upon opening the envelope, the recipient claimed she experienced shock in seeing her face collaged onto the nude body of a pornographic model. This instance, for Doherty, is echoed in the DADA era of montage, particularly the affect induced by the fragmentation of the body in the collage aesthetics of the interwar era and the prosthetic bodies of returned war veterans: a condition the DADA movement used for political purposes.⁴¹ The shocking departure from the mimetic representation of the body, she states, creates this affect, and what is central to this mimetic reconfiguration of the body is the employment of photographic

media – the death mask.⁴² This same tendency takes place in deepfake production.

The death mask, as the photographic portrait, is addressed most centrally in Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, who articulates the innate conflict between photography and self-perception. Barthes refers to the hallucinatory condition of heautoscopy; or 'autoscopy', a condition that refers to the 'external perception of oneself.'⁴³ For Barthes, photography echoes this very condition simply because every photograph of oneself involves an objectification of one's own body, an encounter with the self as other. He writes:

'... the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity. Even odder, it was before Photography that men had the most to say about the vision of the double. Heautoscopy was compared with a hallucinosis ... but today it is as if we repressed the profound madness of Photography: it reminds us of its mythic heritage only by that faint uneasiness which seizes me when I look at 'myself' on a piece of paper ...'⁴⁴

What photography elicits as a response in the photographed is a perceived departure from, or adhesion to an internalised self-image, 'this looks like me', 'this doesn't look like me'. Barthes's dissatisfaction with the photographs taken of himself is that he never feels 'neutral' before the camera, he can never be himself. The misalignment between perception and sight here is prompted by the photograph, deepfakes exacerbate the tendency that is always already produced by photography. To this end, in curious spectatorship with deepfakes, what leads to illumination or decipherment of the screen is the spectator's encounter with the double, with the visible fragmentation of the self as other.

Let me briefly return to the case of my park acquaintance, Fred, who experienced a sense of disidentification when encountering himself as Iron Man. Fred had wanted me to show his wife the image of his masquerade as Downey

Jr, but the explosive exhibitionism of such a character was at odds with his internal self-image. He had wanted me to show his wife the image – but he did not want to see himself as such. Fred did not identify with the heroic physicality of Downey Jr, could not project himself into the stereotype of masculinity. It is this movement between points of identification and disidentification that emerges out of the curious spectator's play with deepfakes. In Mulvey's case of the gendered film spectator, there is visual pleasure to be gained from the imaginary projection and identification of the self with the main male character, but with new media technologies, this imaginary projection is algorithmically realised and conflates spectator and spectacle – what pleasure there is to gain hinges on the spectator's identification or disidentification with the surrogate on the screen.

For social media enthusiasts who play with deepfakes, self-image is the primary goal for sharing and identity signalling based on identification with Hollywood identities both past and present. There is a plethora of Audrey Hepburn memes where users delight in visualising themselves as the glamorous actress. Whereas, in the ever-increasing case of deepfake pornography, a deepfake of a woman's stolen face or body can have a catastrophic, trauma inducing impact on self-identity. It is either this departure from or adhesion to the ideal image that renders the deepfake delightfully playful or traumatic. What gets played out in the field of deepfake production is a split. On the one hand, there is playful self-image production for social media, curious spectators' network themselves in virtual drag and become gender fluid – in other words, the 'male gaze' gets blown apart and atomised. The singular 'male gaze' becomes a networked gaze, multiplied in the way it produces many different experiments in seeing oneself and others in multiple stolen and borrowed bodies. Where play however becomes traumatic, aggressive, and violent – as we see with

the use of deepfakes to undermine another's political or sexual identity, is where users take control of another person's image. To unexpectedly encounter oneself as an external, fragmented other generates a rupture in the spectator's totalizing field of vision.

Deep self-perception

During the global pandemic amidst one of our many lockdowns, I downloaded the Reface application on my smartphone. At first the exercise was sociological: I was interested in what happened when I inserted myself into film clips and music videos and distributed these images to my social media account. I wanted to know what type of feedback these synthetic interventions would receive. I began taking snippets from Hollywood films of my childhood such as, *The Birds*, *Rear Window*, *Vertigo*, *Casablanca*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, among others. I saw what it was like to occupy the body of Tippi Hedren and Sophia Loren, to be placed into the poses of Marilyn Monroe and to saunter around as Lauren Bacall in *To Have and Have Not* (1945). I encountered visual pleasures that perhaps aligned with common social media user experiences: I was looking for resemblances, for my capacity to 'fit' into the body of the surrogate on the screen.

Inserting myself into the film, *The King and I* (1956) (Figure 5), I encountered my half-Asian origins – so peculiarly appropriated by the Russian American actor Yul Brynner, who I became in the *King and I*. In the film production, Brynner plays King Mongkut, the king of the Siamese empire, now known as Thailand. In my family, *The King and I* was revered because it contained the topic of Thailand in a mainstream Hollywood film, despite its blatant orientalism. Being half Thai, my decision to occupy the form of Brynner was a gesture of reclamation, a way of replacing Brynner's heavily applied make-up with my own face. I was surprised by the way I seamlessly transformed into his fake tanned body,



Figure 5. Sara Oscar, As Yul Brynner in *The King and I*, 2020.

the way my skin tone matched, finally, with an actor who was layered in foundation to look darker. Seeing myself on the screen display as Brynner, I became acutely aware of the racial bias inherent to the deepfake algorithm and the hierarchies of training data, where users with brown skin (such as myself) who swap faces with white figures on screen find themselves rendered into the skin tones of the target figure, rather than retaining their own skin colour. My face swap with Brynner was visually plausible, but my gender was misaligned.



Figure 6. Sara Oscar, As *Ingrid Bergman*, 2020.

My experience of shifting between modes of identification and disidentification arrived when I swapped my face into a premixed video of Ingrid Bergman, a scene of footage where she holds a baby (Figure 6). As a mother myself, I experienced something like an estrangement from myself, an encounter with myself from the outside. I could see myself performing an activity that was known to me, cradling a baby, but at the same time I was rendered into a scene I had never embodied: I inhabited Bergman's specular body as a surface. The sense was one of disembodiment – I was looking at myself as Bergman: looking at my own eyes in a picture, standing in the body of another, and this produced a radical dissociation between the embodied experience of carrying a baby and how I appeared as Bergman. This was itself what Barthes referred to as the madness of photography, as heautoscopy, the external perception of the self.

To this end, what is apparent in deepfake production is the way in which videos either adhere to or depart from self-image. It is not uncommon to see users depicting themselves as Marilyn Monroe in *Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend*, from bearded men to cleanly shaven men, to women of vast cultural backgrounds. The deepfake only emphasises a

perceptual accuracy in this case: a desire to be glamorous. It is interesting to see the way the ‘masculine’ user employs deepfake technology, often in jest. On social platforms, the male image regularly appears deepfaked into the swaggering Captain Jack Sparrow from *Pirates of the Caribbean* or onto bikini clad bodies like Pamela Anderson. What is rarely seen, on the other hand, is a male subject placing himself into the masculine body of Brad Pitt. To do so would be to reveal the unstable fallacy of masterful self-image, and the power that goes with it.

Deepfakes bring to light the surface of the image – the way in which the image becomes a potential palimpsest for endless manipulation. They resemble circus stand cut outs that enable visitors to place their faces inside of and pose for a photograph. These only serve to highlight the surface of the image, ones without depth. This is where curious spectatorship leads to a form of decipherment: becoming aware of the material attributes of film and algorithms, the spectator becomes aware of the illusionary space of film and this reveals the mechanism of the look. Every figure in digitised photographs and films is a vehicle for masquerade, every time we create and upload a self-image, our own faces on screen can be removed and replaced with other faces, just as we can borrow other faces and parade in others. It is this intermingling of skin and code, the transformation of the death mask into an object of play, that disrupts the voyeuristic tendencies of the gaze with the lure of identification, and the lure of identification of course, produces fragmentation, pixels, ruptures, and little holes in the picture plane, little perforations that show how the skin of a face can so quickly be interchanged and perpetually exchanged.

Filled with a range of choices to become anyone, the algorithms of deepfakes enable self-visualisation in a range of ego ideals represented in Hollywood films. Tech companies offer limitless scope to see oneself and others

in a range of onscreen others, to experience the infinite possibilities of identity through the ever-mutating avatars of deepfake technology. In this way, the gendering of the gaze and its binary structures is complicated by such fluidity, at a time when gender itself is a fluid concept. But the opportunity to visualise a range of other selves is complicated by the tyranny of choice offered by fantasies of algorithmic optimisation to become anyone, but this seemingly neutral freedom is itself an ideologically determined choice of self-interpellation. The decision to choose between inserting oneself into the body of J-Lo or James Bond offers another illusion of the mutability of self-identity guided by the ideals of commodified star bodies of visual culture.

Conclusion

I began by looking at Mulvey’s theories of gendered film spectatorship during two distinct eras shaped by changes to cinema technology and the expansion of film viewing environments. My motivations for doing this were led by one point in her essay on the male gaze that has always stuck with me: how do we free the direction of the look to disrupt hegemonic structures of looking? In the male gaze there are only two options for women, either she is passive, quiet and stabilises masculinity, or she threatens masculinity and, as a result, becomes a fetish object. In these positions, I saw a legacy, or a ‘tension’ between the male gaze, and the ‘origin story’ of deepfakes in non-consensual pornography that gave birth to the wider ‘deepfake problem.’ Surely, I thought there must be a way to use deepfakes to think through these tensions, problems, and hegemonies.

While deepfakes are algorithmically generated images, they build upon a long history of looking at bodies, classifying them, studying biometric qualities of faces, and building infrastructure to automate the computational surveillance of the face. They come to life in a

conversation between the generative and the adversary algorithmic codes that work together to manifest them, they are not singular manifestations but are cultivated by connections and ‘tensions’ (Jacobsen and Simpson 2023). It is important remember this ontology when we think about their operation within socio-political spheres and media like photography and film: how we interact with them in different ways is also going to create some form of tension between oneself as an embodied subject and the other screen-self as a pluralist, ever changing surface that moves between characters and roles and calls back to an imaginary primordial *other*.

The deepfakes we identify with, that shock us, move us, and make us question our objectivity, ethics, and morals are also deeply tied to our own social, cultural investments in the image. In this respect, our desire to use deepfake technology to manipulate the figure on screen – whether it is playfully curious, or repetitively fetishistic and violent, and how we respond to those deepfakes is always going to be determined by other images in all their intermedial forms. Ultimately the deepfake problem is not one that can be solved by banning them or detecting them. There is, however, one thing that creative practice can do, and that is sensitise us to the tensions that exist between two spheres of deepfakes: the dominant political hegemonies that they stabilise, and the other, their playfully transformative potential.

Notes

1. Otherwise known as ‘face swapping’ or synthetic media technology – terms I also use interchangeably in this paper. Deepfakes employ deep learning algorithms to swap faces by sampling images that have been synthesised with neural networks known as a ‘generative-adversarial network,’ or a GAN. As the product of deep learning, deepfakes are a subset of artificial intelligence. For a clear and detailed breakdown of how

deepfakes are made, and the differences between forms of deepfakes, see the publication on the Homeland Security website titled *Increasing Threat of Deepfake Identities*, particularly https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/increasing_threats_of_deepfake_identities_0.pdf

2. Scholars Wu, Ma, and Zhang (2021) note a similar tendency on the Chinese deepfake platform, Zao. They state the category, goddess, in this instance receives millions of clicks as the subject of user generated deepfakes. See Wu, Ma, and Zhang (2021). ‘I Found a More Attractive Deepfaked Self The Self-Enhancement Effect in Deepfake Video Exposure,’ *Cyberpsychology, behaviour and social networking*, Volume 24, Number 3.
3. I use the term ‘tensions’ because deepfakes are always generated *in connection* to data that already exists, and this is embedded in its very structure – a deepfake is a compound of a generative-adversarial network. Ontologically speaking, it cannot be thought of in isolation but as the sum of its parts between source data and target data. I am not the only one to notice this – see also Benjamin Jacobsen & Jill Stephenson (2023). I will address these scholars later in the introduction.
4. For example, Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, 1982, Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen*, Autumn, 1975, of note – in 1998 this view is asserted in Francisco Casetti 1998, “the viewer seated in the theatre lives with the film, and does so by finding the means to recognise himself in this or that motif ...” p.9.
5. Mulvey 2009.
6. Mulvey 2009.
7. See Wendy Chun 2006. *Control and Freedom, Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*. Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press. Chun here argues that pornography and sexuality are central to debates of technological regulation and commerce, see “Screening Pornography,” pp 77 - 128
8. Christopher Holliday astutely addresses this connection in his essay, he notes Trumps own distribution of political deepfakes on his Twitter account, see ‘Rewriting the Stars: Surface Tensions’ *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, Vol. 27(4) 899–918, 2021.
9. Henry Ajder, Giorgio Patrini, Francesco Cavalli, and Laurence Cullen, “The State of

- Deepfakes: Landscape, Threats, and Impact”, Deeptrace laboratory September 2019. https://regmedia.co.uk/2019/10/08/deepfake_report.pdf, accessed 14 December 2021.
10. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second: On Stillness and the Moving Image*, 2006, p.191.
 11. Andre Bazin, Ontology of the Photographic Image, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Summer, 1960), pp. 4-9; see also Mulvey 2008; 58–59.
 12. Mulvey 2009; 26.
 13. Mulvey 2009, She writes: “... his enforced inactivity, binding him to his seat as a spectator, puts him squarely in the fantasy position of the cinema audience.” p.24.
 14. Mulvey refers here to Sigmund Freud’s theory of scopophilia, or the pleasure that comes from looking. She sees the darkened environment of the cinema theatre as facilitating the scopophilic instinct, due to the spectator’s ability to look at the screen without the gaze being returned. pp. 16–17.
 15. Jacques Lacan, ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function,’ 2006; pp. 75–81.
 16. Lacan 2006, 76.
 17. Bruce Fink 1995, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, p. 37.
 18. Johnston, 2018
 19. Mulvey 2009, 18.
 20. Stacey 1994, pp. 20–23.
 21. Mulvey 2009, 40.
 22. See Mary Ann Doane 1982. “Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator,” *Screen*, Volume 23, Issue 3-4, Sep/Oct 1982, Pages 74–88, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/10.1093/screen/23.3-4.74>. Doane states “It would seem that what the cinematic institution has in common with Freud’s gesture is the eviction of the female spectator from a discourse purportedly about her (the cinema, psychoanalysis) – one which, in face narrativizes her again and again.” p.77.
 23. Judith Halberstram 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, New York: NYU Press, pp. 76–96.
 24. Mulvey 2009; 26.
 25. Mulvey 2019, *Afterimages: on Cinema, Women and Changing Times*, 250.
 26. Mulvey 2008; 191.
 27. Mulvey 2008, 191–192.
 28. The desire to repeat and return to play with an image, while it evokes the repetition compulsion of the Freudian death drive, is avoided in Mulvey’s description, it is associated with a redefining of the pessimistic death drive into a drive for happiness. See p. 192.
 29. Grace Smith [@graceesmith17]. 2020, 7 December. i can’t tell the difference for some of these ... #reface #refaceapp #lookalike #victoriajustice #selenagomez #ninadobrev #elenagilbert #fyp. Tiktok. https://www.tiktok.com/@graceesmith17/video/6903190256523185414?sender_device=pc&sender_web_id=7042464665087870465&is_from_webapp=v1&is_copy_url=0.
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 36. Madigan [@thatswhackybro]. 2020, 29 May. When I go live people say I look like Miley Cyrus. I decided to swap our faces to find out. #greenscreenvideo @mileycyrus. Tiktok. https://www.tiktok.com/@thatswhackybro/video/6967510809396268293?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1.

37. The Fakening, 2020, 12 June. YouTube. https://youtu.be/nLoACCVO_gg
38. Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index?" in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, 2008, p.33.
39. Christopher Holliday, "Rewriting the stars: Surface tensions and gender troubles in the online media production of digital deep-fakes," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, Holliday observes: "In the case of Deepfakes that playfully recast and retrofit popular cinema through sophisticated computer graphics, the creation of playful audiovisual (re)combinations falls largely in the category of *problematic fit* insofar as the desired outcome is typically a conflicting mix of star and character." The 'problematic fit' also functions as playing with inversions of associations with characters in deepfake production.
40. Brigid Doherty 1997.
41. *ibid*, 1997.
42. *ibid*, 1997.
43. Elizabeth Grosz *n.d.*, *Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, 1990, p.37. I am employing Grosz's term here. In Grosz, autoscopy aligns with the Lacan's mirror stage of development, whereby the child encounters their mirror image but notes introceptively and extroceptively the image of their double.
44. Barthes 2000, 12 – 13, 2000.

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