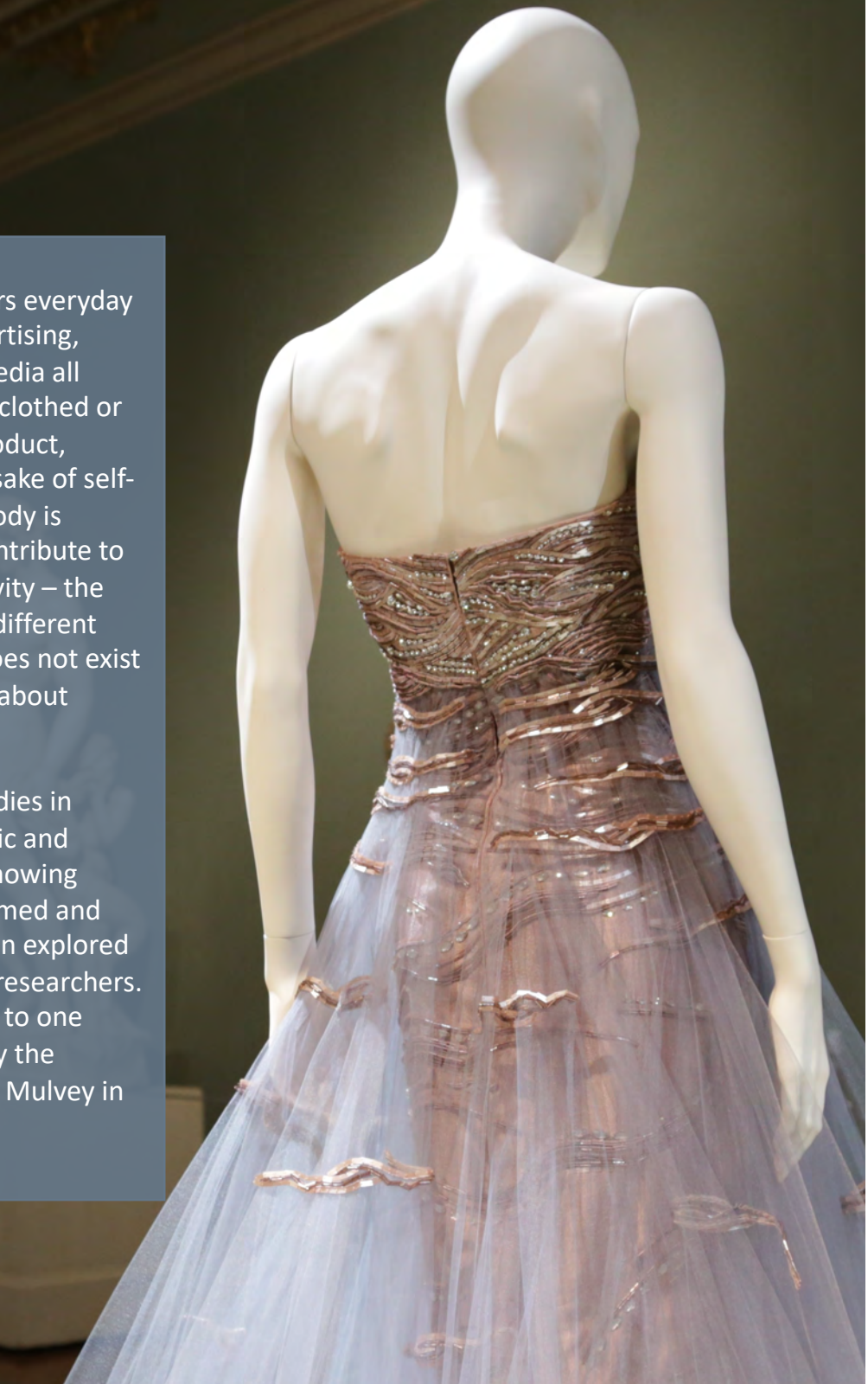


BREAKING FREE FROM THE MALE GAZE

We look at ourselves and others everyday in many ways. Television, advertising, films, magazines, and social media all show bodies clothed, partially clothed or undressed in order to sell a product, advance a plot line, or for the sake of self-representation. The way the body is presented in the media can contribute to body diversity and body positivity – the knowledge that all bodies are different and a ‘normal’ body as such does not exist can help us make us feel good about ourselves.

Media portrayals of female bodies in particular are often problematic and merely serve the purpose of showing women as objects to be consumed and looked at by men. This has been explored by media and communication researchers. This worksheet introduces you to one influential theory developed by the filmmaker and academic Laura Mulvey in the 1970s: the male gaze.





KEY IDEAS

The media are a key part of our contemporary world and how they represent different groups, genders, and cultures matters enormously. Because we receive so much information through different media channels, apps and platforms, how we see ourselves, the people around us and the wider world is strongly shaped by media representation. This is especially the case for issues around sexuality, religion and also disability.

Laura Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* was published in 1975 in the British academic journal *Screen*. This essay comes out of the context of the feminist movement and the implications of the 1968 student movement across Europe. Mulvey argued, drawing on psychoanalysis, that Hollywood cinema was structured along a threefold gaze (by the audience, the camera and the characters) that looks at women from a male point of view and regards them as mere (sexual) objects. Through this male gaze, Hollywood cinema reproduces and upholds a patriarchal society and renders women passive and men active. Cinema is dependent on this binary of active men and passive women as they are the devices around which a story is structured. Cinema is a voyeuristic experience for men. As close-ups of female bodies or body parts are brought into focus, Mulvey suggested that women can only be shown in patriarchal terms and in relation to men.

The male viewers identify with the images they see of the male protagonists, who lead the plot, are active and in control. The viewers see a glamorous, powerful and perfect character on screen and (unconsciously) want to be like him. They identify with the man. Women likewise identify with the female characters and want to be desired in a similar way and objectify themselves as sexual objects. These processes occur largely unconsciously for audiences. The cinema (and we could say audio-visual media more generally) responds to our biological drive for looking, and in particular for looking at bodies, but such ways of representation are nonetheless problematic.



KEY READINGS

Johanssen, J. (2019). *Psychoanalysis and Digital Culture: Audiences, Social Media, and Big Data*. London: Routledge. Available from: bit.ly/2HHImOL.

Loreck, J. (2016). *Explainer: what does the 'male gaze' mean, and what about a female gaze?* [online] Available from: bit.ly/2ZY7bNn.

Lowe, E. (2016). *Laura Mulvey and the male gaze in the 21st century* [online] Available from: bit.ly/2vFmI71.

Mulvey, L. (1989). *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London: Macmillan. Available from: bit.ly/2WqCmyM.

ACTIVITIES

1. Watch a short sequence from any contemporary film or television series and analyse how women and men are shown. You can focus on:
 - i. how bodies and body parts are shown;
 - ii. which bodies are active and which ones are passive;
 - iii. how the wider mise-en-scene, CGI, or lighting affects the scene;
 - iv. how the point of view is directed.
2. Discuss in small groups: do you agree with the theory of the male gaze that suggests that we unconsciously identify with how women and men are shown in the media?
3. Discuss the question with the whole class: Mulvey's theory was developed in the 1970s, has media representation changed since then?