

Ella Langridge

Professor Luis Duno-Gottberg

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The *Mona Lisa* and the Male Gaze

In the 2013 documentary “Treasures of the Louvre,” from the British Broadcasting Corporation, two men stand in front of an image of a woman and perform their attraction to her for the camera. The woman is not overtly sexualized within the image; she is fully clothed in thick black and sitting with her arms folded. She is the *Mona Lisa*, one of the most iconic art images to come out of the Mediterranean world, and a representation of an actual woman who historically lived and died. The two men are depicted, within the text of the documentary, very much as authoritative, thoughtful intellectuals. This documentary is, after all, backed by the BBC, a governmental cultural institution that holds great authority in the U.K. and elsewhere.¹ The gaze of the two men in the documentary, endorsed by a credible cultural institution and a powerful government, is thus an utterly normalized and hegemonic one. Their performance, the camera's endorsement of it, and its sexualization of the woman, then, allow insight into the meaning of the normalized hegemonic male gaze--how it operates, how it performs, what its performance constructs, and what its power can destroy. This paper seeks to investigate the dynamics, performance, and implications of the gazes present in this documentary and to uncover what they can tell us about looking at art and about looking at women.

¹ The idea of the importance of institutions in public discourse and education underlies Michel Foucault's work “The Orders of Discourse,” in which he claims that “this will to truth, like the other systems of exclusion, relies on institutional support: it is both reinforced and accompanied by whole strata of practices such as pedagogy - naturally - the book-system, publishing, libraries, such as the learned societies in the past, and laboratories today.” These institutions include, one would assume, governmental educational programming bodies like the BBC. (Foucault, *Orders of Discourse* 1971)

The Documentary

The following is a transcript of the discussion of the *Mona Lisa* from the documentary “Treasures of the Louvre.” For much of the scene, the two men are having a conversation in French, which is then dubbed over in English. I have not attempted to transcribe the original French; at issue is not the verbatim words said in the conversation, but how the documentary chose to portray and perform that conversation. I have not included the identities of the two speakers in the text, although these are easily accessible, because this paper is not intended as a particular criticism of the two men being depicted.² Rather, this paper is intended as an analysis of a performance, an interaction, a cinematic product, and as a critique of the cultural forces driving said product. The men will instead be identified by names for their characters in this performance: the Narrator, the film’s main character and voice, who appears both embodied on screen and, frequently, as voice-over exposition, and the Curator, the curator at the Louvre with whom the Narrator discusses the painting, to gain a perspective framed as more expert or specialized.

(Instrumental music plays)

(Camera is slowly moving towards the case where the painting hangs)

The painting days of the great genius were over, but it’s thought that he brought with him you know who.

(Instrumental music swells)

This painting, that millions come to see today, was the first ever work of art to enter the French Royal Collection.

(Camera fades to close-up shot on the painting’s face)

(Music: *Mona Lisa, Mona Lisa men have named you...* singing continues, but is talked over by Narrator)

Ah, *Mona Lisa*! That smile, That smile! Enigmatic-

(Camera jumps to closer shot of just the smile)

² This is also why I have chosen to block out the performers’ faces in the images in which they are clearly visible. This piece is not about them, per se, but about the performance in which they participate.

Mysterious, tender, or mocking? ‘What is it about that smile?’, I asked the Louvre’s curator of Renaissance Art, ---.

(The camera cuts to the Narrator and the Curator, standing in front of the railing in front of the painting’s case, first from a distance behind them, and then from a closer shot in front of them.)

(The Narrator begins speaking in French. An English translation is then dubbed over.)

Narrator:

The problem I’ve got with the *Mona Lisa* is that she’s such a big media star!

Curator:

What you have to do is to try and forget that she’s such a big star and really get in to the painting. Get up close and love it for what it is. And she definitely invites us to love her!

(The music swells, the camera returns to a close up shot on the painting’s face, then returns to the shot of the two men.)

It’s such an incredible ability of the painter to portray that most difficult and subtle of human expressions: the smile.

(The camera cuts to a close-up shot of only the painting’s smile and begins to slowly zoom in further.)

There are a thousand ways of interpreting a smile, and that was the genius of Leonardo, to be able to capture such a subtle and rich human expression.

(The camera cuts back to the shot of the two men.)

Narrator:

And she’s such a flirt!

Curator:

Of course, she’s a huge flirt! The French like that sort of thing! But, hey, you’re not completely untouched by her, are you?

(The Narrator, laughing, loosens the top button of his collar.)

(The camera cuts back to a close-up on the painting’s face. The music swells and fades out with the singing *Mona Lisa*. The camera cuts to a shot behind the two men, facing their backs and the face of the painting.)

(Laurence Timestamp 7:20 - 9:22)

The Men’s Gaze

The discussion of the way the two men are gazing at this painting must begin with where they are gazing from, which Marita Sturken and Laura Cartwright, in their book *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, call the “field of the gaze” (103). The men are alone in a room in the Louvre—typically the most sought after and crowded room in the Louvre. This

is already a position of privilege. They are not, of course, actually alone. There must be camera people and crew with them, as implied by the multiple angles and shots from which the room is shown. That fact, however, is excluded from those very shots; no cameras or crew are ever visible to the viewer, obscuring the fact that the men are performing, and framing them as alone. This framing has a remarkable effect when placed in the context of the rest of the stage blocking: the two men stand beside each other, leaning on a rail and looking at a glass case on a wall, which contains the third visible human figure, the *Mona Lisa*. They seem to outnumber and confine the subject of the painting, an effect which is amplified when gender is brought into the field by the use of English 'she/her' pronouns for the painting, which treat the object as a 'woman'. The image on the screen is then two men, alone in a room, with an isolated woman pinned on the wall before them. The 'woman' in the painting is being physically surrounded and isolated, and visually consumed by men, trapped, and subjected to gaze. It is clear who is in power.



(Laurence Timestamp 8:04)

Once the men have subjected the 'woman' to their spatial power, they exert their power verbally. They continue to use 'she/her' pronouns to ascribe will to 'her,' and the will they ascribe to 'her' largely conforms with their own sexual desires, real or performed. Their actions here are described by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey in her groundbreaking 1975 *Screen* article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema": "The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure" (808). The most glaring example of projection in the documentary's dialogue is the "flirt" ascription, in which the Narrator asserts that the subject of the painting is "a flirt", language which casts 'her' very being as inherently sexual. The Narrator thus makes the assertion that the disempowered 'woman' has a will to flirt with, arouse, or have sex with them, to which the Curator replies in an emphatic positive. Further, he responds with "Of course," casting the desire of the 'woman' to have sex with them as a foregone conclusion, when that desire is, in fact, entirely of their own creation. The fact that these men are creating a 'woman' onto which to project their sexuality is hinted at even more explicitly in the lyrics of the scene's music: "Mona Lisa, men have named you." The sexual desire of the men, whether real arousal or merely a performance of it, is projected onto the 'woman' that they have gained power over, and constructs 'her' as a sexual object.

The Men's Performance

As implied above, however, this sexual desire may be merely performed. It seems relatively unlikely that two adult men would be so overcome by lust, when faced with the image of a fully dressed woman in a small painting, as to lose all decorum, especially in full knowledge that they are being filmed. Here, again, the complex framing of the men as alone, while simultaneously being observed by each other, the cameras, and thus potential millions of documentary viewers, comes into play. Their framing as alone, safe from social consequences

and checks, is part of the power of their field of gaze. They are alone with the 'woman,' and the 'woman' is alone with them, which creates the idea that there is no outside check on their power over her. However, they are not alone in the sense of being unobserved, meaning that many others can observe what they do with that power.

Feminist author and theorist bell hooks, in her 2004 book *The Will to Change*, specifically the chapter "Male Sexual Being," argues that the societally sanctioned male quest for sex is built on "a culture of domination" (79), in which men have "the right to dominate females sexually," that will never be fulfilling in a personal or interpersonal way for men, and that has long "victimized" women and other men (hooks 78). She also argues that this dominant sexuality is one of the principal means of constructing "patriarchal masculinity," because "boys learn early in life that sexuality is the ultimate proving ground where their patriarchal masculinity will be tested" (hooks 79). This dominant conception of sexuality assumes "sex is something men have to have," and that, in sex, "males should dominate females" (hooks 77), defining manhood and compulsive, dominant sexual lust in reference to one another. However, sexuality is policed, giving men limited opportunities to prove their manhood, as it is defined, such that "Sexual repression fuels the lust of boys and men" (hooks 81). Within that framework, "males must engage constantly in sexual fantasy, eroticizing the nonsexual" in order to retain masculinity and patriarchal power (hooks 81). "Eroticizing the nonsexual" is exactly what the two men in the documentary are doing. Their field of gaze, their unchecked yet observed power, is the perfect environment for a test of hegemonic masculinity. The patriarchal hypothesis is that, when the repression is not present, when men's power is unchecked, their compulsive sexuality will take hold, proving their hegemonic masculinity. The unseen observation of the cameras allows the result of the test, and the proof of manhood, to be visible. The test is of how they will use their

power, and the condition for passing as men, to the observers, is that they use it to sexually dominate the 'woman'.

These men are not constructing their masculinity through the actual act of sex with a woman, or real sexual domination of a woman, but that is not the only way that sexuality can construct gender. In their paper "Doing Gender," authors Candace West and Don Zimmerman argue that gender is constructed in much smaller interactions. They contend that "gender" is, and is constructed by, a "routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction" (West and Zimmerman 125). The two men in this documentary are engaged in a fairly clear example of one of these interactional, mundane creations of gender.

The test becomes overt when one of the men verbally calls into question the masculinity of the other. The Curator asks the Narrator: "you're not completely untouched by her, are you?" With this question, he challenges the Narrator's heterosexual manhood, by implying that, as a man, the Narrator must be attracted to the painting. The Narrator then performs his manhood, via this standard of attraction to the *Mona Lisa*, by loosening his collar, a gesture toward physical, compulsive lust, arousal, and virility. The idea is presented, and endorsed, that the only way a man can appreciate an image of a woman is by sexualizing it. He must prove his identity, and his hegemony, by performing his attraction to the constructed 'woman,' thus constructing himself via 'her.'



(Laurence Timestamp 9:06)

The Camera's Gaze

The documentary's camerawork furthers the sexualization of the painting, in a manner remarkably similar to the cinematic male gaze in Hollywood film as described by Mulvey, who was also highly concerned with how men construct themselves in reference to women, and "the function of women in forming the patriarchal unconscious" (804). Mulvey says that cinema casts "Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look" (808), a casting which is certainly present in this documentary, since the 'woman' being looked at is literally, even within the diegesis, an image, and since the men are shown looking at her, and doing little else, throughout the scene. The men, then are "the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen" (Mulvey 810). This fact is demonstrated constantly in the documentary's camera work, as shots switch from showing the men looking at the 'woman,' to shots just of the 'woman,' which focus the spectator's gaze on her with and via the two men. The drawing of the spectator into the men's way of looking is vital here. As the spectator "projects his look" onto the men gazing

possessively at the 'woman' in the film, the spectator is "through him gaining control of the woman within the diegesis" (Mulvey 811). Within the narrative, the man in the film possesses the woman, and "By means of identification with him, through participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too" (Mulvey 811). In short, the documentary's camera work and narrative are inviting its viewers to do the same thing the men are doing, gazing, yes, but more than that—gazing in a way that objectifies and possesses the 'woman'.

This objectification of the 'woman' is what Mulvey calls "the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring" (811). She associates the process of fetishization with "over-valuation, the cult of the female star" (Mulvey 811), an observation which is, ironically enough, in complete accord with the Narrator's complaint that "The problem I've got with the *Mona Lisa* is that she's such a big media star!" Mulvey describes the fetishized woman's body being "stylized and fragmented by close-ups" (812), just like those this documentary very frequently uses, of the painting's face, smile, or hands. In fact, the documentary very rarely shows the whole painting, or gives the viewer a good idea of its overall layout. Mulvey states that, visually, close ups of "one part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space" (809) and construct the "woman as icon" (810) for the erotic gaze. In this documentary, the process Mulvey describes is strikingly visible, and strikingly literal. The *Mona Lisa* is one of the pioneering examples of the use of deep Renaissance space in art, and the close-ups, by largely ignoring the depth and surroundings in the background of the portrait and by fragmenting and visually dissecting its human subject, destroy the Renaissance space of this Renaissance painting. The camera destroys the space and makes the Renaissance 'woman' into an icon, for the sake of the male gaze, as channeled through the men in the documentary. And the camera makes the spectator "complicit, caught in the moral

ambiguity of looking” (Mulvey 814), sharing the same powerful look as the men in the documentary.



(Laurence Timestamp 8:51)

(Laurence Timestamp 9:44)

Double Standards

Narrator:

Now, what else is there left to say about this painting?

(The camera cuts to a slightly more complete view of the painting and begins to slowly zoom in on the face.)

Only that in the Sixteenth Century, La Joconde, as it’s known in France, was something quite new, in western art.

Curator:

The idea of creating a sense of contact between the viewer and the subject had never been done before.

(The camera cuts to a close-up of the painting’s hands.)

Or the open posture, with her hands turned toward us. She’s greeting us as if we were in her palace—in her room, even!

(The camera cuts to a close-up of the painting’s smile.)

And it’s even smiling at us! That technique of drawing the viewer directly into the painting was hugely innovative.

(The camera cuts back to the frontal shot of the two men.)

Narrator:

Was all this a new departure for western art?

Curator:

Absolutely. How many politicians’ portraits have you seen in the style of La Joconde? Everyone uses Leonardo’s style, from the framing, to the posture, to the direct approach of the subject to the audience.

(The camera cuts to a more complete view of the painting, and zooms in.)

Narrator:

So how influential was this approach to portraiture, at the time?

(The camera cuts to a close-up on the hands of the painting of Francois I and pans up along the length of the torso to the face.)

Well, let's go back to the portrait of Francois. Had its creator, Jean Clouet, seen the *Mona Lisa*? We don't actually know. But Francois does look us straight in the eye.

(The camera cuts to a close-up on the hands of the painting.)

His body's turned towards the viewer. And his hands face the same way as Da Vinci's Florentine Lady.

(The camera cuts to a close-up on the painting's face, and zooms in.)

And as with her, we're drawn towards the personality of the king.

(The camera cuts to an exterior shot of the Louvre.)

Francois was not only a patron of the arts, but a builder of palaces.

(The camera cuts to two semi-nude female exterior statues.)

He'd spent some time in Italy, and he wanted to emulate the style of the Renaissance Palazzi.

(Laurence Timestamp 9:22 - 11:13)

The documentary's treatment of the portrait of Francois I, placed directly after and in deliberate conversation with their previous discussion of the *Mona Lisa*, provides an incredibly direct point of comparison. Although the Narrator implies that the portrait of Francois I was a deliberate imitation of the *Mona Lisa*, and although the documentary frequently highlights the formal similarities between the two, the discussion of the two paintings differs in how their subjects are treated.

Francois I is not sexualized. Despite the fact, which the documentary itself is very invested in pointing out, that he sits in essentially the same pose and engages with the "viewer" in essentially the same way. The camera does fragment Francois I's body as well, with close-ups and panning that obscure the full layout of the painting, and of his body. These shots may serve to further emphasize important, individual formal similarities to the *Mona Lisa*, by showing the same areas in the same way, drawing visual comparisons to the previous close-ups of the *Mona Lisa*. However, the dynamics of diegetic gaze surrounding him are very different. The camera

does not, once it focuses on the painting of Francois I in this scene, cut back to the Narrator to show how he is looking at it and allow the viewer of the documentary to share that gaze. In a previous scene, (Laurence Timestamp 6:35), the camera does show the Narrator with the painting of Francois I, but he is alone, meaning he does not outnumber Francois I, nor does he stand directly before the painting, in the confining way that the two men stand before the *Mona Lisa*. Indeed, the Narrator in this earlier scene does not even gaze at Francois I; he looks at the camera, sharing the painted gaze of Francois I, and standing beside the painting, like an equal.



(Laurence Timestamp 6:52)

The commentary on the two paintings is the main site of the contrast in their subjects' treatment. The *Mona Lisa* "invites us to love her!" The painting of Francois I has us "drawn towards the personality of the king." The Narrator claims this personal draw was previously ascribed to the *Mona Lisa*, saying the draw is "As with her," despite the fact neither man made any reference to the *Mona Lisa* sitter's "personality" outside of a purely sexual context. In fact, the main draw attributed to the *Mona Lisa* here is into "her palace—in her room, even!", a clear

fantasy of entering the constructed ‘woman’s’ intimate space. The ‘woman’ in the *Mona Lisa* is “a flirt.” Francois I is “a patron of the arts.” There is an obvious independent variable between these two similar paintings: one is of a woman, and the other is of a man. Though they are formally similar, one painting is read as sexual because its subject matter reads as feminine.

This difference in treatment manifests in the documentary’s interest in Francois I, the historical person. The commentary does not just discuss the painting of him, but him, describing his other feats and achievements, as “a builder of palaces” with his own aesthetic tastes, agency, and historical actions. He is not sexualized. Instead, he is contextualized in reference to his historical personhood. He is not just the subject of the painting, but a man with subjectivity, and a documented and meaningful will of his own. Instead of ascribing a will to him, the documentary is curious about his own will. Despite also being a portrait of a historical person, the *Mona Lisa* is not granted the same dignity.

Mona Lisa

I have been referring to the *Mona Lisa* as a ‘woman’ to refer to the disempowered feminine object the two men create to project their sexuality onto. But there is a woman in this picture. Her presence, though perhaps extant only in traces, does not alleviate the problems with the documentary’s gazes; in fact, her presence only makes these problems more consequential.

This painting is of a historical woman. That fact, however, has been obscured by the painting’s fetishization, both in this documentary and in general, as art Historian Frank Zöllner notes in his article “Leonardo’s Portrait of Mona Lisa del Giocondo,” on its historical origins:

Since the beginning of this century, the *Mona Lisa* has acquired the status of a universal icon stripped of its historical context, which seems both to provoke and to defy scholarly attempts to understand it. Yet the painting remains the portrait of an individual person

and it is as such that it has been understood in the history of portraiture. Therefore, one would expect that significant consideration had been dedicated to the identity, social status and biography of both patron and sitter. However, as we have seen above, the identity of the sitter is by now regarded a matter of little importance. (Zöllner 116)

He attempts to read the painting with an eye to this sitter, to gain access to the facts of her identity, obscured by time and, ironically, by her portrait. Zöllner endorses the traditional identification of the subject as *Mona Lisa del Giocondo* and reveals what he can of her biography. Her maiden name was likely “Lisa Gherardini,” and she married “Francesco del Giocondo” in “the beginning of March 1495” (Zöllner 119). In “June 1499,” before the painting was done, she had lost a daughter, and some historians, not including Zöllner, have theorized that her black veil indicates a “state of mourning” (Zöllner 121). Zöllner himself theorizes that the portrait of her was commissioned by her husband to decorate a new house he had bought, celebrating the “establishing of a man’s new household” (123), but also “an important step for the family” (122) as a whole. It is also clear from this description of her household, and from her middle-class background, that she wouldn’t have lived in a “palace,” as the Curator’s dialogue in the documentary, showing a lack of curiosity about the sitter’s historical life, fantasized. Because her husband married her without much economic or political incentive, Zöllner states that “We might even conclude that he married Lisa for genuine affection and that this affection also had some bearing on his decision to have Leonardo portray his wife” (119), providing a potential glimpse into her interpersonal relationships.

As for the motives behind how Leonardo portrayed her, Zöllner writes that most of her surroundings, including her black veil and style of dress, were likely used like symbols in most women’s portraiture at the time, for “The representation of morally sound social conduct” (125).

It is likely that the portrait sought to portray Lisa as Florentine women at the time were expected to be, and show that she met the “demands on women,” with her veil “indicating the wedded state of women and the desired virtues associated with it, such as chastity, devotion and obedience to God” and even her “particular way of the right hand resting upon the left was recommended as the appropriate gesture for girls or young women to show their morally sound social conduct” (Zöllner 126). It is notable that her performance in the picture, which is seen as sexual now, was likely seen as quite properly chaste and virtuous centuries ago. Zöllner also, however, allows for an alternate theory to explain her mode of dress, which may at last reveal more about her subjectivity than about the feelings and demands of her husband or of the painter’s style: “right at the beginning of the sixteenth century black or dark clothes were *en vogue* and considered a sign of splendor and dignity” (127). Mona Lisa may have styled herself, in this way, as not only a virtuous woman of her time, but a fashionable or even glamorous woman of her time, and a dignified subject in her own right.

That dignified subject is erased from the text of this documentary. Lisa del Giocondo is destroyed, along with the Renaissance space, when she is constructed only as an icon. The line “Mona Lisa, men have named you,” in the song that underlies the scene, blatantly denies the real woman, who likely bore that name, ownership of her identity. But that alienation of her autonomy also reflects the wider process that her husband, the artist, and generations of art lovers have all perpetuated, simultaneously revealing her image to the world, making it ubiquitous, while obscuring her subjectivity with their own fantasies, making the woman in the image a “matter of little importance.”

New Gaze

The husband, the artist, the Curator, and the Narrator, are all party to a process of destroying a real woman in order to construct a ‘woman’ from which to construct manhood. And, if this process is normative, if this is how men are expected to perform when placed in a field of gaze with power, and this is a performance that a powerful entity like the BBC feels should be broadcast as a model of art appreciation, then it is safe to assume that it is normal for women to be deconstructed and reconstructed in this way. That men on the street and in workplaces and in society are deconstructing and reconstructing their feminine peers.

But it is possible that all seeing is the deconstruction and reconstruction of an image, in that objects that are assumed to be outside of the viewer are reconstituted as perceptions within. And it is possible that all desire involves projection, in that it is a will internal to a subject interacting with the external world. Art appreciation is not inherently immoral, and neither is appreciation of art involving women, even sexual appreciation. Attraction to women is not immoral. People in sexual relationships often perform as subjects and objects simultaneously, being the subject enacting and feeling their own sexual desires, as well as the object upon which the other enacts and projects theirs. This can be done respectfully, if each party can be both things simultaneously, and respect the subjectivity of their object of desire. So, how can people who are attracted to women (I widen my scope here to ‘people’ because heterosexual men certainly do not hold a monopoly on such attraction) perform that attraction, and constitute the ‘woman,’ in a way that does not destroy the agency of the woman?

I would propose a paradigm for art appreciation based on reading in good faith, defined as looking at the subjects of art with an eye to their subjectivity. In the case of the *Mona Lisa*, good faith reading would involve genuinely seeking out the will of the subject of the painting,

considering the real desires of the real historical woman, and not ascribing a will to her for which the only evidence is one's own sexual desire. This is not as complicated as it may sound. Good faith reading is already present in the documentary's reading of the painting of Francois I, which is contextualized by his historical personhood and genuine curiosity about his own will. That sort of reading need only be applied more equally. If a woman is performing sexually, for the gaze of the artist, if she is being "exhibitionist," to employ Mulvey's terms, then her performance can be read sexually, but 'she' in 'her' entirety as a being should not be. A person's performance as an object, or as a subject of a painting, does not erase their subjectivity. And, if the woman is merely sitting, vaguely smiling, and looking towards the artist, perhaps it is a bad faith reading, an abuse of the power of the gaze, to construct 'her' as a purely sexual object.

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