

# ANTAGONISTIC COUTURE

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## I. INTRODUCTION

*Antagonistic Couture: Subverting the Male Gaze* is an investigation of the cinematic male gaze and how it has situated itself in everyday interactions. The chief concern of *Antagonistic Couture* is women's varying reactions to the male gaze and a desire to make these, as well as the gaze itself, visible to the viewer.

One of the most oft-repeated bits of advice about living in New York City is that you should never make eye contact with strangers or look at anyone for a prolonged period of time. However, as any woman living in the city will tell you, it is very obvious that many individuals do not adhere to this behavior. To walk down a city street is to

seemingly invite gawkers, propositions, and unsolicited commentary. Compounding this is the fact that while so many women try to deflect such unwanted attention, they are at the same time bombarded with provocative images of highly-idealized, overly-sexualized women on billboards, TV's, advertisements, and magazine covers that are very obviously inviting the onlooker's gaze. The prevalence of such images of women is at the heart of film theorist Laura Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze". The male gaze theory classifies the presentation of women in film as passive objects to be looked upon from an active heterosexual male point of view.

My thesis is a reaction to the imposition of the manufactured male gaze of cinema and advertising into everyday life, into the daily interactions between men and women. *Antagonistic Couture* is a manifestation of the antagonistic female response to the objectification of the male gaze. Through the use of subversive imagery printed on dresses, it seeks to challenge the male gaze in a variety of ways – by presenting the male heterosexual viewer with imagery that is threatening to the viewer's masculinity or challenges their notion of what is appealing and what is alarming. In a gallery setting, such imagery would not be seen as new or novel, however I believe my application of it to wearable everyday garments brings it much closer to its goals. One of the most insidious aspects of the male gaze is the self-objectification and insecurity that it causes in women. The primary objective of my thesis is to exploit the male gaze to manipulate

men into feeling this same kind of uncertainty, unease and embarrassment. While I do not expect to put a stop to the male gaze, I hope that the project will make men reconsider their behaviors, and more importantly, encourage dialogue about objectification and feminism.

## **II. DESIGN QUESTIONS**

My primary design questions are as follows:

What would it take to subvert the male gaze?

How can clothing be used to actively change the behavior of those who view it?

How can I encourage discussion about feminism, objectification, and the male gaze?

Discussion of the male gaze is usually in regards to its ubiquity in advertising and film – what I refer to as the ‘manufactured’ male gaze (manufactured in the sense that it is imposed on viewers by its creators). My work is in response to the everyday counterpart to this phenomenon. The male gaze is noted for the way in which it reduces the object of the gaze to a passive object that exists only to provide ‘visual pleasure’ for the viewer. Obviously, an actress on a screen or a model in a magazine ad is not affected by or aware of the stares of onlookers, a fact that makes prolonged, intent viewing of

her possible. Repeated, unprohibited viewing of this sort lends itself to similar unabashedly direct gazing at women in real life. Another design question guiding my project is whether men realize the extent to which they practice this type of gaze and the effects that it has upon women. These overarching questions have led to the more specific inquiry into what kind of imagery would be necessary to thwart the male gaze. What kind of imagery do heterosexual men find most disturbing, alarming or off-putting?

### **III. AUDIENCE AND SETTING FOR FINAL IMPLEMENTATION**

Because the subject of my thesis is such a widespread and deeply ingrained social phenomenon, my target audience is very broad. That being said, the imagery on the dresses I've created is geared specifically towards a heterosexual male audience. My hope is that it will appeal to women as a manifestation of their day to day struggles of being objectified.

My intention for the garments I'm creating is that they be worn by women on the street in everyday situations. The purpose of the dresses is to engender discussion about the male gaze, objectification, feminism, American male culture and homophobia. While displaying the dresses in a gallery will hopefully have this effect also, I feel that the kind of individuals who would be present in such a setting would already be cognizant of such issues. The dresses should be worn where the male gaze is most likely to

take place – in the public space, between strangers. I originally felt that real-time eye-tracking technology would be the ideal tool to investigate many of my design questions, but eventually shifted my focus upon realizing the immense and under-utilized potential clothing has for propagation of ideas and provocative discourse. Instead of turning themselves into free billboards for meaningless brands, people could easily broadcast more meaningful information through their clothing. Women are in a particularly lofted position in that the male gaze puts them (and by extension, what they wear) perpetually in the spotlight and under scrutiny by men and other women alike. My project seeks to exploit this constant attention to highlight issues of feminism and objectification that many viewers would avoid if presented with them directly. While I am still very interested in the prospect of using eye-tracking technology to assist in this goal, at this time I've chosen to focus on the creation of simple yet striking garments to convey my point instead.

#### **IV. IMPETUS /WHY IT MATTERS**

One of my main motivations behind this project is a desire to remind people that issues such as the male gaze and sexual objectification do still matter and are still very relevant. I feel that feminism has become a very polarizing, even alienating topic – I hope this project reframes it in a way that both men and women alike find interesting and thought-provoking. The impetus for my project lies first and foremost in my everyday experiences

of being a woman living in a media-saturated society. While imagery that objectifies women has long been a staple of our visual culture, it is the increasing willingness of women to mold themselves into such exaggerated, overly sexual characters that I find most intriguing (as well as disturbing). The option to thwart the male gaze completely by covering oneself up has always been present (willingly or forcefully, as demonstrated by the hijab, burqa, etc.) but at the expense of women's right to self-expression. In light of this, I'd like to give women options that defy or challenge the male gaze instead of pandering to it further, without robbing them of the ability to still dress in ways that are feminine, flattering and sexy. The motivations and intentions of my project will be examined further in the following section.

## **II. DOMAINS AND PRECEDENTS**

Most of my research has been centered around the theory of the male gaze, gender studies, feminism and the larger domains of sociology and psychology that they inhabit. In addition to the obvious need to develop a firm background in the theories behind my primary male gaze concept, this research is also intended to suggest possible dimensions of the male gaze that have not already been investigated at length. My thesis concept is greatly motivated by the idea that women are increasingly willing to objectify themselves (rather than solely being subjected to objectification by men). This trend typifies the post-feminist argument that feminism is

'no longer relevant' and women adopting stereotypically male attitudes or objectifying themselves is empowering in some way.

Much of my primary research has largely been about objectification. The key thinker in this field is Laura Mulvey, the film theorist who identified and labeled the male gaze theory in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema".



**Figure 1 Ursula Andress as the first Bond Girl in Dr. No (1962) - classic cinematic male gaze imagery**

“In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. “<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the female form is constantly presented in film through the lens of the heterosexual male point of view, existing chiefly to give visual pleasure to the male viewer. Indeed, women in film exist indeed as simply a 'form' first and foremost, and an actual woman with independent motivations and desires second (if at all).

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<sup>1</sup> Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Screen 16(3): 6–18.

While Mulvey was concerned chiefly with the male gaze in contemporary film, John Berger's documentary *Ways of Seeing* grounded the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of women as a recurring theme in Western imagery over the ages, summing it up perfectly in the phrase "Men look at women; women watch themselves being looked at."<sup>2</sup> The documentary examines in detail how ownership of nude female figure has been an institution in Western art – first through the artist's 'capturing' of the form on the canvas, then through the collector's obtaining of and viewing of the form in private.



**Figure 2 Still from John Berger's "Ways of Seeing"**

Of course, the male gaze is not at all unique to Western culture. For a previous project, I designed a conceptual cell-phone 'accessory' called an "Urban Anonymizer". One of the fashion accessories for women that people most associate with urban life, and New York in particular, is sunglasses. For a woman living in the city, the weather rarely factors into the decision whether or not to wear sunglasses when going out. Rather, the glasses are worn to avoid eye contact and make oneself uninviting and hopefully less approachable to men. The cellphone can be used in the same way – speaking with other women my age, I found that they also sometimes pretended to be speaking on their phones or listening to music on headphones to dissuade unwanted attention from men. The notion that women felt the need to constantly have such defense mechanisms at their

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<sup>2</sup> Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. BBC, 1972.

disposal to navigate through the urban space unharrassed was a powerful indictment of the male gaze. The Urban Anonymizer combined these mechanisms in an opaque motorcycle helmet-type head covering that could also house one's cell phone for hands-free operation. The helmet would create a literal 'bubble' of personal space while the strangeness of it would make the wearer look completely alien, unfriendly, unapproachable and even alien.

While responses to my concept were positive, many pointed out the obvious precedent I had not considered – the burkha. The call to Islamic women to wear this all-encompassing garment is often attributed to these passages from the Quran:

“Say to your wives and your daughters and the women of the faithful to draw their outergarments close around themselves; that is better that they will be recognized and not annoyed.

And say to the faithful women to lower their gazes, and to guard their private parts, and not to display their beauty except what is apparent of it, and to extend their headcoverings to cover

their bosoms, and not to display their  
beauty except to their husbands,...”<sup>3</sup>

While some proponents of the burkha in the Islamic world suggest that it protects a woman’s modesty from the prying eyes of men, the practice has been widely criticized as a harsh tool of patriarchy, one that completely robs women of their individuality and rights of self-expression. If it is indeed intended to protect women from the male gaze, it is a cruel kind of protection that effectively ‘punishes’ the woman by denying her the right to be seen in public. Rather, it furthers the misogynistic attitude that all women can be reduced to just their bodies, that they lack any other identifying or unique attributes. I felt that the intention of my Urban Anonymizer helmet – to be discomfiting to males while protecting the female – and the fact that wearing it would be a voluntary act distinguished it from the tradition of the burkha. This tendency to deal with the ‘trouble’ of women’s bodies by simply covering them up was one that I had to remind myself to actively avoid. Likewise, I was struck by the verse in the Quran that proposed that women ‘lower their gaze’ around men – a clear signal of submissiveness and passivity. Realizing that I was effectively doing just this by constantly shielding my eyes in public and proposing women wear a garment such as the Urban Anonymizer was a startling revelation. The

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<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia, “Burqa”, Wikipedia,  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burqa>



Figure 4 Images from *Dreamworlds II: Desire, Sex and Power in Music Video*

kind of meek acceptance of things as they are that my cell-phone helmet unintentionally advocated was something I was keen to not pander to again in future work.

The excellent documentaries *Dreamworlds II and III: Desire, Sex & Power in Music Video* by Sut Jhally, Professor of Communication at the University of Massachusetts, illustrate in striking detail the prevalence of the misogynistic male gaze in that very specific realm of the music video.<sup>4</sup> Both documentaries are particularly damning in their comparison of the kind of real-life sexual violence that emerges from the objectifying, deameaning, and often pornographic imagery of music video. In *Dreamworlds II*, Jhally shows this by juxtaposing hair-metal music video shots with segments from the 1988 movie *The Accused*, depicting the brutal gang rape of a young woman by three men in a bar (based on a true event)<sup>5</sup>. In the second installation of the documentary series, Jhally intersperses rap videos with footage of the aftermath of the 2000 Puerto Rican Day parade, where scores of women were assaulted, groped and attacked by male attendees<sup>6</sup>. One of the most troubling images from the parade was of women being forcibly sprayed

<sup>4</sup> Jhally, Sut. *Dreamworlds II: Desire, Sex and Power in Music Video*. Media Education Foundation, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> IMDB, "The Accused", IMDB, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094608/>

<sup>6</sup> Lueck, Thomas J., "Controversy Grows Over Arrests at Puerto Rican Day Parade", New York Times, <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/06/17/controversy-grows-over-parade-arrests/>

with men's drinks – a perfect pantomime of rappers inexplicably dousing women with champagne and beer in their videos, despite their protests. (This scene came back to haunt me just weeks after seeing the documentary, when an evening out in New York culminated in an argument I was held back from attacking a man as he sprayed his beer on me.)

Other influential researchers in the domain of objectification are Tomi-Ann Roberts of Colorado College, whose research on the psychological and physical effects of sexual objectification on women has been invaluable. Roberts' investigates at length the costs of the self-consciousness that the male gaze produces. In addition to the negative emotions of shame, anxiety and disgust, she describes how a preoccupation with one's appearance can actually have a detrimental effect on physical and mental performance.<sup>7</sup>

The most influential literary precedent for my thesis was "Are Men Necessary?: When Sexes Collide", a 2005 book by New York Times op-ed columnist Maureen Dowd.<sup>8</sup> The book describes the backlash and rejection of 1970's feminism at length, particularly in the phenomenon of modern day women 'asserting themselves' and their womanhood by objectifying themselves and adopting overly sexualized, Playboy

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<sup>7</sup> Roberts, T-A. The woman in the Body. *Feminism and Psychology* 12 (2002) 324-329.

<sup>8</sup> Dowd, M. , *Are Men Necessary? : When Sexes Collide*, (Berkeley Trade, 2006)

bunny-esque personae. The book was an impetus for me to pursue work that would reinvigorate the topic of feminism among my female peers. Also highly influential was Norah Vincent's "Self-Made Man: One Woman's Journey into Manhood and Back", a memoir about the year and a half the author spent living, working, and dating as a man. Her insider point of view of how it felt to walk down a city street as a man after experiencing it for so long as a woman was utterly fascinating. My earlier description of the cinematic male gaze lending itself to similar unabashed viewing of women in everyday life is perfectly illustrated in the following passage, recounting her first night out in her neighborhood dressed as a male.



Figure 5 Norah Vincent's "Self-Made Man"

"I had lived in that neighborhood for years, walking its streets where men lurk outside of bodegas, on stoops and in doorways much of the day. As a woman, you couldn't walk down those streets invisibly. You were an object of desire or at least semi-prurient interest to the men who waited there, even if you weren't pretty - that, or you were just another piece of pussy to be put in its place. Either way, their eyes followed you all the way up and down the street, never wavering, asserting their dominance as a matter of course. If you were female and you lived there, you got used to being stared down, because it happened every day and there wasn't anything you could do

about it.

But that night in drag, we walked by those same stoops and doorways and bodegas. We walked right by those same groups of men. Only this time they didn't stare. On the contrary, when they met my eyes they looked away immediately and concertedly and never looked back. It was astounding, the difference, the respect they showed me by not looking at me, by purposely not staring. “<sup>9</sup>



Figure 6 Cover images from Playboy and Vogue, as compared in The Objectifier

These two books formed the primary impetus behind my Spring 2009 mini-thesis entitled *The Objectifier*, which sought to illuminate the convergence of pornographic culture with mainstream pop culture. By dynamically juxtaposing lyrics from popular songs from the last 50 years with cover images from women’s fashion magazines and pornographic magazines from the same time period, the project sought to show how mainstream pop culture has grown to resemble pornography both in how women are referred to and how they are represented. My argument was primarily against the notion that the male gaze is something solely perpetrated towards women by men. In my research, I found surprising similarities in the cover imagery between *Vogue* – a fashion magazine geared towards women –

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<sup>9</sup> Vincent, Norah. *Self-Made Man: One Woman's Journey into Manhood and Back* (Viking Adult, 2006)

and Playboy, a soft-core pornographic magazine intended to titillate men. I was curious about what drives the trend of women seemingly opting for the same imagery that men stereotypically prefer. The half-naked models on the covers of Vogue magazine – is that what women actually want to see, or is that merely what they are being sold? Is it just the magazines (and the companies whose advertisements fill them) reinforcing in women’s minds that ‘this is what you should strive to look like’ – or do women enjoy the imagery in and of itself? I felt that eye-tracking technology would be the ideal tool to investigate these questions, as I will discuss later in this document.



Figure 7 The NewsKnitter

The domain of gender studies largely guided the ‘content’ of my thesis, that being the concept. The ‘form’ was situated in the domain of interaction design, specifically the sub-domains of fashion design,

eye-tracking, physical computing, and data visualization. While the obvious key thinkers in the data visualization field would be information designers such as Edward Tufte and Martin Wattenberg, in the context of my thesis I was most interested in the application of data visualization to wearables and fashion design. As such, my most influential precedent was the NewsKnitter by Ebru Kurbak and Mahir Mustafa Yavuz<sup>10</sup>. Garments lend themselves effortlessly to

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<sup>10</sup> Kurbak, Ebru and Yavuz, Mahir Mustafa. “NewsKnitter”, <http://www.casualdata.com/newsknitter/>

being canvases for information and ideas, yet this potential seems largely unrealized. The NewsKnitter project, which produced sweaters knitted with patterns derived from newspaper RSS feeds and stock market fluctuations, is a prime example of a garment that displays information in a way that is informative but still wearable and beautiful. Other inspiring artists in the field of wearables are Syuzi Pakhchyan, author of the incredibly informative *Fashioning Technology*<sup>11</sup>, Leah Buechley of MIT Media Lab and creator of the LilyPad Arduino<sup>12</sup>, and ITP student Elizabeth Fuller<sup>13</sup>, who has been my peer mentor in the field.



Figure 9 Do-Ho Suh's Some/One



Figure 8 Hussein Chalayan's Readings

Another influential figure not as obviously situated within this field is the sculptor Do-Ho Suh<sup>14</sup>. Suh is inspiring to me not only because of the obvious beauty of his sculptural garments such as *Metal Jacket* and the immersive *Some/One*, but also because of their power to convey a very specific sentiment without actually being 'interactive' per se. Another similarly situated figure is the fashion designer Hussein Chalayan. While my very recent discovery that Chalayan has already created works that are practically identical to what I had originally envisioned for my thesis project in terms of both concept and execution is

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<sup>11</sup> Pakhchyan, Syuzi. *Fashioning Technology: A DIY Intro to Smart Crafting*. (Make Books, 2008)

<sup>12</sup> Buechley, Leah. "DIY Tank", [http://web.media.mit.edu/~leah/grad\\_work/diy/diy\\_tank.html](http://web.media.mit.edu/~leah/grad_work/diy/diy_tank.html)

<sup>13</sup> Fuller, Elizabeth. "Elizabeth Fuller" <http://efuller.net>

<sup>14</sup> PBS. "Art:21 . Do-Ho Suh . Biography . Documentary Film | PBS". 2003, <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/suh/index.html>

disheartening, it is inspiring (as well as validating) to see his approach<sup>15</sup>. Chalayan's 2007 "Readings" collection used mirrors and LED's to illustrate "the dynamic between icons and their audience", much like my original thesis concept of using illumination and reflection to demonstrate the relationship between the objectifier and the objectified.

My initial exposure to eye-tracking technology was through a collaborative new media project I participated in at the University of Virginia called "Awe, Value, Punctum". The assignment was to create a series of images that contained a 'punctum' of some sort, some specific detail that would draw in the viewer and elicit a deeper, more personal reaction. My teacher, Seth Hunter (now at MIT's Media Lab) turned the project into an interactive experience when it was displayed in the gallery by adding eye-tracking software that monitored the viewer's eye movements. As the viewer looked at the image, a projection was thrown onto a wall outside of the viewing space that showed the image being looked at, the viewer's eyes, and the path of their gaze as illustrated by the eye tracking software. Seth has continued to be one of my primary mentors in my work, aiding in both technical advice and aesthetic considerations. My other significant mentors in the field of eye-tracking were Chris Sugrue and Zach Lieberman of the Free Art & Technology group for their work on the Eyewriter project<sup>16</sup> (as well as Sugrue's own MFA thesis with its extensive use of eye-

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<sup>15</sup> Chalayan, Hussein. "Readings.", 2007, <http://www.showstudio.com/project/readings/>

<sup>16</sup> F.A.T., "EyeWriter.", 2009, <http://ffff.at/eyewriter/>

tracking tech<sup>17</sup>). The Eyewriter is a tool geared towards paralyzed artists to allow them to draw using only eye movement. The creators of this project also took a DIY approach towards eye-tracking that was particularly impressive due to the exorbitant costs usually involved in obtaining pre-configured devices. This creative application of a technology most-frequently used for marketing purposes was a very inspiring precedent. Ultimately, I utilized the open source eye-tracking program ITU Gaze Tracker<sup>18</sup>, developed by Martin Tall and Javier of the ITU in Denmark. Both were very supportive of and took a keen interest in my work.

In keeping with my previously stated overarching domains, my direct mentors have been faculty members in the psychology and sociology departments of the New School and other educational institutions. Among them are Emanuele Castano, a social psychology professor at the New School for Social Research who recently did a study examining the detrimental effects of sexual objectification on intellectual performance; Megan Kozak, a psychology professor at PACE and close associate of Tomi-Ann Roberts; Lisa Rubin, a psychology professor at the NSSR who specializes in the psychology of women and cultural effects on body image. My mother Kasturi DasGupta, a sociology professor at Georgian Court University in Lakewood, NJ has also been of great help in

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<sup>17</sup> Sugrue, Chris, "Re-Gaze.", 2005,  
<http://csugrue.com/regaze/>

<sup>18</sup> ITU Copenhagen, "ITU GazeGroup", 2009,  
<http://www.gazegroup.org/>

directing my research.

Ideally, my contribution to the feminist domain is not to necessarily reveal new insights into objectification and the male gaze, but to bring the theories to life through a visual, provocative experience. Furthermore, I wish to remind those not immersed in the field how pertinent these issues continue to be in our society. Terms such as feminism and the male gaze are often met with derision by men and women alike – I hope that my project is able to frame these concepts in a way that compels viewers instead of alienating them. Old guard feminists may object that I am not saying anything novel or introducing any new theories. To this I would respond that while they bemoan this lack of novelty in the newest wave of feminists, they have fallen out of touch with the fact that a majority of young women have become completely desensitized to (or have even internalized) the everyday objectification that has always been one of the primary feminist struggles. I believe that getting too involved in feminist theory would have caused me to fall into the thinking of “this has all been done before”. The more important thing to consider is whether or not “it” actually succeeded in its goal the first time around. The absence of feminism in public discourse and the belief of many that feminist struggles are “over” is a clear sign to me that the old arguments need to be continued.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

## I.PRODUCTION

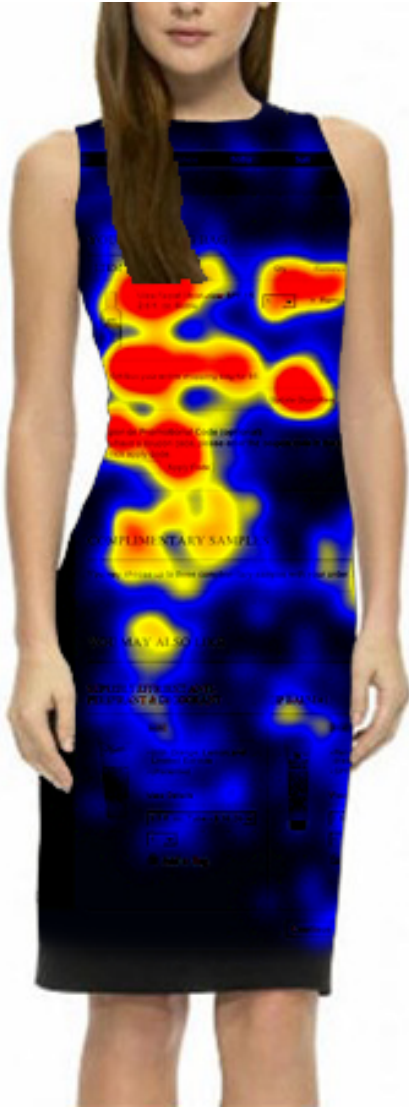
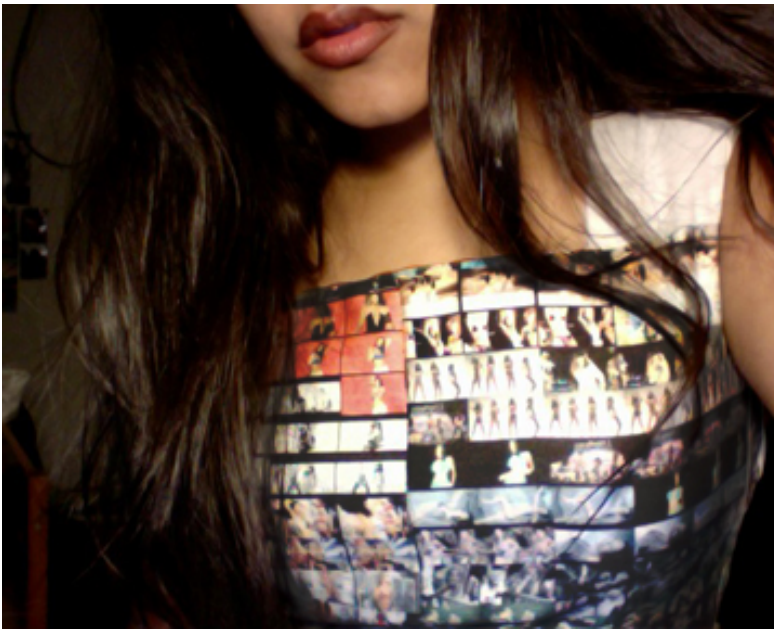


Figure 10 Early eye-tracking heatmap dress concept

The original intention of my project was to investigate the male gaze (and the female gaze) through eye-tracking technology. The questions that The Objectifier gave birth to seemed perfectly suited for further inquiry through eye-tracking. I saw the potential to take the theory of the male gaze and show it in a literal, quantifiable way. I also was fascinated by the opportunity to compare male and female gazes to show what men and women actually focus on when they look at images of the opposite sex, as well as their own. I imagined this to culminate in an installation with a real-time eye-tracking component as well as previously compiled eye-tracking data, and possibly a series of sculptural garments decorated with the visual data as well. However, it became apparent that a simple comparison of the male gaze with the female gaze was likely to be anti-climactic – though it could be ‘interesting’, it also would run the risk of trying to inform people of things they already know. I realized that my objective needed to be refined to something more specific and concrete than “the idea that women have adopted the male gaze is really interesting, don’t you agree?” And while the possibilities that eye-tracking offered were tremendously exciting, the fact remained that without a clear thesis objective, they would merely be a gimmick.

To display the imagery from my planned eye-tracking data collection, I had envisioned the use of sculptural,

conceptual dresses. After moving away from the use of eye-tracking, I instead pursued the concept of creating wearable dresses printed with imagery from pop culture, print media and advertising. My primary concerns after this point in terms of production were 1) deciding upon the proper imagery for the dresses; 2) how to create and design the fabric; and 3) how to create the dresses.



The initial plan for my dresses was to cover them with imagery from very stereotypical male-gaze oriented scenes from classic cinema (for my prototypes, I chose film stills of Bond Girls). The interaction arising from dresses with this type of imagery was imagined as a defiant response to the unrealistic appraisal that the male gaze typifies. When a man

Figure 11 Bond girl dress

looks at a woman, he is mentally comparing her to the plethora of images of idealized women he has seen in the media. By wearing a garment already covered with these images, it suggests that the wearer is sarcastically implying “If that’s what you’re looking for, here it is – I hope you’re happy! I know what you’re up to.” Out of this idea grew the concept of a number of dresses embodying the spectrum of female attitudes to the heterosexual male gaze (this sarcastic, derisive response being just one). I divided this spectrum into four positions. First was what I called “Inviting the Gaze” – a short, flirty dress covered

with music video imagery from the Dreamworlds documentary that was intended for a woman who enjoyed the attention of the male gaze. Second was “Aware/Conflicted” - a longer, classier but still sexy dress covered with Bond girl imagery, for a woman who was bothered by the objectification of the male gaze but also aware of its benefits. The next step of the spectrum was “Critical” - a floor-length, full-sleeved dresses with a hood, plastered with Playgirl magazine covers or photos of androgynous men. On the most extreme end of the spectrum was “Antagonistic/Threatening”, which would be manifested in a conceptual garment, possibly armor-inspired, covered in images of naked men, gay porn, battered women, or other similarly violent and disturbing imagery. However, in presenting these ideas to my peers, the resounding reaction was that having dresses that fully covered the body comprised of disturbing images was redundant – a dress that ‘matronly’ would not attract straight male viewers in the first place, rendering the troubling imagery pointless. (Also, it fell into the same trap of my previous project the Urban Anonymizer – dealing with the male gaze by simply covering up the female.) Respondents were much more interesting in the idea of sexy, revealing garments that were covered with disturbing imagery. The hypothesized ‘vibration’ in the heterosexual male viewers’ minds of “I want to look/I don’t want to look” was far more provocative, both visually and conceptually.



Figure 12 The Playgirl "Beefcake" Dress

Once I settled upon my general concept of creating dresses with imagery that would be threatening to heterosexual men, my first prototype was a dress made of fabric printed with Playgirl magazine centerfolds. As an undergrad at the University of Virginia, I had taken a Sociology of American Media

class with Carey Sargent. In one class, we watched a documentary by her colleague Evren Savci about the 'formulas' of pornography. People were given the option to opt out beforehand, as we were warned it was quite graphic. Having never seen pornography before, I was definitely alarmed (as were many of my female classmates, gauging by their reactions) by how the women were treated. However, all the students sat through it, no one left. This all changed when the montages switched from heterosexual porn to gay male porn. Almost immediately there was a mass exodus of males from the room (led by the few members of the football team who happened to be in the class). I was absolutely mesmerized by the display of heterosexual male fragility and insecurity wrapped up in this incredibly homophobic gesture. The Playgirl centerfold dress works on the assumption that a man who would be inclined to objectify women would also be the type to be find gay porn deeply threatening.



While I had previously printed the fabric on my own Inkjet printer, I found this approach lacking due to poor color saturation and image clarity.

Fortunately, I was able to find a number of retailers online that printed custom fabric for individuals (rather than retailers). I printed my designs through Spoonflower.com on a simple quilting-weight cotton. I sewed all the dresses myself following a simple pattern by McCall's on a Singer sewing machine. The pattern that I chose for these dresses was a simple, form-fitting strapless straight-line dress that came to the mid-thigh. The choice of pattern was dictated largely by the fabric (a rather stiff cotton with no stretch or draping ability) and also

my desire to keep the viewer's focus on the print rather than the cut of the dress. Simple ribbon embellishments in complimentary colors were added as a final touch to give the dresses more of a finished look.

The responses that Playgirl dress garnered went on to influence the imagery for the next round of dresses. I wore the dress in public and also posted several pictures of it online. I expected my target audience of macho, homophobic men to respond to the dress with disgust,

Figure 13 Bodybuilder and male model dresses

while I thought more open-minded men would simply find the dresses amusing or though provoking. I was surprised when one male viewer (who I expected to fall in the latter category) stated that the pictures of Playgirl models ‘made him want abs’. This response of insecurity about his own physical appearance after being presented with images of naked men inspired me to make two more dresses that would hopefully have the same reaction. For my next two dresses, I chose images of male bodybuilders for one and male models for the other. One of the most insidious aspects of the male gaze is the self-objectification and insecurity that it causes in women. The primary objective of these dresses was to exploit the male gaze to manipulate men into feeling this same kind of uncertainty, unease and embarrassment by tricking them into looking at images of men with perfect, hyper-masculine bodies and beautiful faces.



The last dress was inspired by a number of conversations with men about other kinds of imagery that could be used to ‘trick’ men. The idea of juxtaposing scenes from hyper-masculine activities (professional sports, NASCAR, video games) with threatening imagery (i.e. homosexual) was one that came up several times. I was reminded of a high school memory of listening to a

Figure 14 Imagery from the MMA dress

male friend talk at length about how he didn't like touching other men. I pointed out to him that he was on the wrestling team. For my final dress, I took images from MMA (mixed martial arts) fights and interspersed them with stills from MMA themed gay porn. The social homophobia that accompanies such homoerotic sports is what makes this dress so effective. In so many male-centric worlds, the undercurrent of fear of being perceived as homosexual or being approached by a homosexual results in an exaggerated homophobia. It was no coincidence that it was football players who were the first to exit the room when gay porn was shown in my undergraduate sociology class. Likewise, it is no coincidence that Rob Halford of the legendary heavy metal band Judas Priest waited until many years after his band had separated to publicly announce that he was in fact a gay man. The repercussions of even being suspected to be a homosexual in worlds structured on such machismo would be devastating, a fact that Halford was clearly aware of in this 2007 interview.

“There was an understanding and acceptance with my bandmates and family without any discussion. I look back at that time and appreciate it because it could've been a hateful, bigoted circumstance. Especially because of the substance of my work -- heavy metal music.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Robertson, Jessica. “Rockin’ Out Interview: Judas Priest’s Rob Halford”, 2007,

Of course, this caricature of simultaneous homoeroticism and homophobia is ripe for mockery. This was demonstrated in shocking (and hilarious) detail in 2009's *Bruno* by Sasha Baron-Cohen, which ends in a staged MMA fight in which two 'fighters' end a sweaty grappling session by kissing and stripping each other down to their underwear – in front of a crowd of thousands of enraged fans.<sup>20</sup> When Johnny Rotten of the seminal punk band the Sex Pistols tied together this dualism of homophobia/homoeroticism with fashion by wearing shirts emblazoned with images of pantsless cowboys drawn by illustrious gay artist Tom of Finland (and designed by Vivienne Westwood), people were outraged<sup>21</sup>. I believe putting such imagery on women's bodies, which are generally perceived as objects of visual pleasure for men, takes this critique one step further.

## II. IMPLEMENTATION

Since making my dresses, I have been wearing them regularly in public and posting images of them on various social networks to invite feedback. While the stated reaction I was expecting from viewers was of homophobic heterosexual males expressing

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<http://www.spinner.com/2007/06/11/rockin-out-interview-judas-priests-rob-halford/>

<sup>20</sup> Baron-Cohen, Sacha. *Brüno*. Film. Directed by Larry Charles. USA: Sacha Baron Cohen, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Neate, Wilson. "THEY MEANT IT, MAAAN... Jon Savage's England's Dreaming Tapes", Blurt, <http://www.blurt-online.com/features/view/405/>

embarrassment, discomfort and disgust, I hoped for strong reactions from other audiences as well.

### **III. USABILITY**

Through the implementation of my project, I've discovered 4 typical responses.

#### **Embarrassment/Distaste.**

“You should make them [the images] so that you need a magnifying glass to see them.” 35-year old male

#### **Validation**

“ i find your antagonistic couture line so innovative because i am very concerned with the subtle ways patriarchy pervades aspects of the everyday. your pieces draw attention to the objectification of women from which we have become so desensitized. your dresses turn the voyeur into the spectacle, and simultaneously raise awareness to gender inequality.

i told my students about your project. they were all so excited about it! i hope it inspired the fashion students to think differently about the possibilities of garments.

i told my students about your project. they were all so excited about it! i hope it inspired the fashion students to think differently about the possibilities of garments.” 27-year old female

### **Introspection**

“I was at a Buffalo Wild Wings one night when the MMA fight was on. I was surrounded by metaheads screaming at the TV and my only thought was "Do they want to kill the guy on TV or make sweet, passionate man-love to him?" I honestly couldn't tell. My next thought: If you turned off the sound to the TV and played Air Supply over the action, it WOULD be a gay porn!“ 31-year old male

### **Amusement**

”That made me laugh really har..... Excuse me...that made me laugh with exceptional gusto!“ 40-year old male

In displaying my dresses, I've also had multiple comments from men and women alike expressing interest in purchasing and wearing the dresses (or other garments/accessories with the same prints).

“I think using my body to objectify men is an interesting twist. watching men recoil in

horror (if they do) will give me pleasure. and they'd be great conversation starters - not just with interesting people, but to talk about the issue at hand.” 30-year old female

“I'd wear the Bodybuilder dress! 1 it's b&w. 2 i like the cut. 3 love the concept. 4 it would piss off a lot of mormons here in utah.“ 27-year old female

“Love the concept!! I would definitely wear one of those dresses.” 35-year old female

“Very cool, I want one!” 36-year old male

The fact that the images on the dresses are copyrighted seemed to be an obvious obstacle in selling the dresses commercially. However, the doctrine of fair use dictates that copyrighted imagery may be used in the case of a critique or commentary on the original work, a condition that might apply to my usage. The question of funding is still an issue, but the widespread interest in my garments that already appears to be present (along with at least one offer of investment) is very encouraging.

#### **IV. EVALUATION**

##### **A. PROJECT**

Based on the feedback I've received on my Antagonistic Couture project, I do believe I achieved my primary goal

of creating garments that encourage discussion and introspection about objectification and feminism, as evidenced by the following quotes.

“I think using my body to objectify men is an interesting twist. Watching men recoil in horror (if they do) will give me pleasure. And they'd be great conversation starters - not just with interesting people, but to talk about the issue at hand. “ 30-year old female

“Keep wearing that dress and you'll put a few more cracks in the glass ceiling.” – 70-year old man

“You are objectifying the male in the process of shifting the gaze away and it is actually making the man feel what women feel – men are in women's shoes!” – 25-year old female

“I can see guys avoiding these outfits, I can imagine some guys finding them hilarious, and I'm sure some guys will try to ignore it and keep their gaze determinedly on your eyes. I would also like to know how many guys find the jiu jitsu dress badass until they realize that one of the pics is kissing.”  
30-year old male

While I believe I was also successful in finding a way to subvert the male gaze through fashion, this was more difficult to gauge. Many people did comment that they believed the garment would be effective in this regard, but I was not able to actually observe the phenomenon while actually wearing the dresses. In the future, having micro-cameras built into the garments or having friends accompany me to record people's reactions to my wearing the dresses in public might ameliorate this problem. However, I am much more concerned with the conversation-starting aspect of the project. Most of the individuals who saw images of the dresses or saw me wearing them in public had little to no background information on my concept or goals for the project, yet their feedback perfectly encompassed the kind of reaction I was seeking. On the other hand, my mentors and critics in the field who were well-versed in feminism, gender studies and male gaze theory also found my execution effective.

“I also immediately presumed looking at the dresses that the trainwreck of someone's homophobia and their desire to stare at a woman's body and being confronted by images of male desire would create this kind of explosion in a person's head that would make it very difficult to stick with their cognitive dissonance between the desire to look and the desire to look away.

I think you're making a strong argument by engaging people in these conversations - while it is imagined in many circles that we don't need feminism anymore because these things are done - there's a way in which the antagonistic part of your argument, of your pieces, is an argument for continuing that kind of set of confrontations.” – thesis respondent Shana Agid

Some of the comments I received from viewers on how to improve the project also fell in line with how I hoped people would respond – women said I should make the images on the dresses larger (in order to be more striking and effective), while several men said I should make them smaller.

I was not entirely confident about the technical construction of my dresses, being a self-taught seamstress. A number of people, however, (including members of the fashion department) remarked that they were well-made. In taking the project further, I intend to upgrade the quality of the materials to make the garments more commercially viable.

## **B. PROCESS**

While I believe my design questions and prototyping process were sound, I feel that I should have done more usability testing and surveys. In the case of my antagonistic spectrum concept, for example, by the time I had presented this idea to my peers I had already designed and purchased fabric to create my Bond Girl and Dreamworlds dresses. My thesis advisor had commented that the ideas behind these garments were redundant, but I did not engage in further user testing to verify this. As a result, I ended up investing significant amounts of time and money in ideas that were then refuted by my peers.

As previously stated, it also would have been valuable to do more directed observation of people's reactions to my garments in real-time (using micro-cameras, etc.) This also would have addressed what I believe to be one of the unfortunate shortcomings of my project – the lack of technology it utilizes. While I believe my project is strong despite being very 'analog', one of my main contributions to the field of objectification studies could have been the use of technology to highlight the phenomena of the male gaze in everyday life. This is a shortcoming I hope to address in future iterations of the project.

Also, while my research into gender studies and objectification was thorough and my connections in the field quite strong, there was a definitely lack of research into fashion design and the social implications thereof. Additionally, I did not directly consult with any members

of the fashion department. While I do not think my project directly suffered from this absence, it could surely have benefited from feedback from designers in terms of technical construction as well as marketing/promotional strategies.

### **C. REFLECTION ON KNOWLEDGE: NOW AND BEYOND THESIS**

Technically speaking, my thesis work greatly highlighted the importance of prototyping and user-testing during the design process. Several of my ideas quickly proved themselves to not be feasible during prototyping, while some ideas that seemed weak showed their value. Likewise, concepts that I believed to be sound were summarily dismissed as soon as they were presented to my peers for user-testing and concept verification. Furthermore, my original eye-tracking concept could have been set aside much sooner (thereby saving me much time) had I engaged in user-testing with my prototypes. Nevertheless, my original pursuit of a real-time eye-tracker resulted in an introduction to physical computing which I hope to integrate into future versions of my garments. The excitement with which my idea for using eye-tracking to investigate sexual objectification was met has assured me that it is an extremely viable area for exploration. My skills as a seamstress have definitely increased to the point where I feel confident in my ability to create garments that can be sold commercially. Most importantly, the connections I have made in the domains of sociology, fashion design and interaction design all

have the potential to lend themselves to very exciting future collaborations.

Having grown up in an extremely progressive household and being the daughter of a Sociology professor with a focus on gender studies, I always believed myself to be very knowledgeable about feminism and sociology in general. Over the course of my research, I've come to realize that I was quite mistaken. While researching objectification and the male gaze, I found that many of my personal observations about gender relations had already been analyzed in much further depth than I could have ever imagined, and long before I was even born. The witty anecdotes by Maureen Dowd that originally launched my work were mere snippets of far more complex arguments in feminist and post-feminist theory. I could see in my own life the evidence of the battles between first and second wave feminism that I had never before recognized. While this research did not necessarily change the direction of my work, it did allow me to speak much more knowledgeably about my field of interest (though not in time to spare me the disappointment of mistakenly thinking that I was the first one to connect Michel Foucault's panopticon with the male gaze). As stated before, I do however believe that I benefited from not getting entrenched in the largely academic debate that feminism has devolved to and was correct in focusing on the classic feminist arguments about the male gaze and objectification. I completely

reject the critiques that I am not doing anything new. I find this to be utterly irrelevant, and highly ironic coming from other feminists, who I would have thought would be relieved to see someone not of their ranks continuing to bring attention to their struggles in the public sphere. In the responses to my dresses, I recorded not one instance of the word 'feminist' or 'feminism'. The word itself has seemingly become taboo in our society. However, the sophistication of responses clearly revealed levels of understanding and insight into gender studies issues that were just waiting to be probed. The media acceptance of controversial gender-ambiguous characters such as Lady Gaga and Adam Lambert show that people are open to the kind of dialogue they inspire – however neither of these performers seems to be fulfilling their potential in this regard. Lady Gaga recently flatly rejected the idea that she was a feminist in a recent interview, perpetuating gross stereotypical notions of feminism stating that “I’m not a feminist, I love men.” Clearly there is much work to be done!

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