

PERCEPTION AND PERCEPTABILITY: ISSUES OF GAZE AND EMASCULATION IN *HIGH FIDELITY*

Apstrakt: *U radu se razmatraju mehanizmi pogleda u romanu i u filmu "High Fidelity". To podrazumeva identifikaciju lika s pozicijom posmatrač/subjekt, što je tipično muška pozicija, ili prizor/objekt, što je tipično ženska pozicija. Ovako definisane rodne kategorije nisu univerzalne ili prirodne kategorije, već društveno određene kategorije povezane s određenim osobinama (muški – dominantan, agresivan; ženski – pasivan, povučen). U članku se analiziraju i implikacije takve identifikacije, moguće posledice nemogućnosti da se zauzme željeni položaj, te mogući načini kompenzacije.*

Ključne reči: *pogled, emaskulacija, (ne)vidljivost, "High Fidelity"*

Key words: *gaze, emasculation, (in)visibility, High Fidelity*

Introduction

"The importance of the concept of identification – which has traditionally been central to theories of character¹ – lies in its ability to mediate between char-

¹ This paper is an abbreviated version of the seminar paper for the exam Characterization in Anglo-American Literature mentored by Prof. dr Vladislava Gordić-Petković, to whom the author would like to express sincere gratitude for all her helpful comments and suggestions.

acter as a formal textual structure and the reader's structured investment in it".² What readers invest is interplay of inference, deduction and interpretation, a process which ultimately leads to the privileged position of making sense. However, any narrative, particularly that belonging to the fictive universe, is always mediated by the process of narration – it is presented to the reader from a certain point of view, be that of the omniscient narrator, or, perhaps, of the involved character. In this respect, it is possible to distinguish between a narrator who speaks and a reader who sees. Acts of speaking and seeing "implicitly invoke a gaze: a look that the subject(s) whose perceptions organize the story direct at the characters and acts represented".³

The theoretical concept of gaze has its origins in film theory and relates to the ways of identification with regards to visual pleasure. In the Western cultural context, the spectator is typically male (identification with this position involves scopophilia, which in turn involves either voyeuristic or fetishistic modes of identification) and the spectacle is typically female (identification with this position involves narcissism). This kind of socio-sexual context allows a re-interpretation of the modes of narrativization and characterization. The categories of masculinity and femininity are not considered to be universal or natural categories of sex/gender, but rather discursive constructs, socially determined categories that are associated with certain features (male – dominant, assertive; female – submissive, passive) and that are analyzed in the artistic process.

The goal of this paper is to consider the relation between the gaze, as a phenomenon explained along gender lines, and the concepts of masculinity and emasculation, in the novel and the film *High Fidelity*.

*"The Most Pathetic Man in the World"*⁴

The narrative, structured through a series of monologues with interludes of mediated speech of other

² Frow J., *Spectacle Binding on Character*, *Poetics Today*, 7(2), Durham: NC, 1986, 243.

³ Newman B., "The Situation of the Looker-On": Gender, Narration and Gaze in *Wuthering Heights*, *PMLA*, 105(5), New York, 1990, 1029.

⁴ Hornby N., *High Fidelity*, London, 2000, 109.

characters, opens in the present day, where we see Rob Fleming, the protagonist and the narrator, as he, enticed by a recent break-up with his long-term girlfriend Laura, ponders over his past relationships and the way they affected his life. He seems frank about the state of affairs he is in – single, owner of a failing business, living in a modest flat, wearing cheap clothes. He admits that the only time he felt truly happy was when he was working as a DJ in a London club. From the perspective of the dynamics of gaze, this is quite revealing. As a DJ, he is the ultimate voyeur. He is in an elevated, or an otherwise removed position in relation to the dance floor, where he has the premier spot for gazing at people dancing. Identifying himself as the subject who gazes, he is assuming a masculine position, with numerous objects at his disposal. This sense of masculinity is reinforced by the knowledge that others are literally dancing to his tune. It is there that he meets Laura. He admits that he did not notice her straight away – “... there were prettier women there, and when you’re looking on in that idle kind of way, it’s the prettiest ones you look at”.⁵ What ultimately makes her memorable is her “radical lawyer spiky hair (...) and scary blue eyes”.⁶ She returned a gaze and it was scary. However, this startling sensation of fear is, for the time being, only temporary. She asks him to play a song which proved in the past to clear the dance floor – she struggles with it and ends up the only one dancing, the only object for him to gaze at.

The relation between seeing and being seen, controlling and being controlled seems to be one of the thematic concerns of the novel. At the beginning of his longest and most mature relationship, he thinks that Laura’s eyes are scary. As Newman points out “a woman who “looks a return” at a man threatens to immobilize him, to deprive him of his self-command, to render him stock-still – practically to paralyze him”.⁷ Laura’s appearance in this scene, with her spiky hair and scary eyes, reverberates as an image of Freud’s castrating “Medusa’s Head”.⁸ Freud’s inter-

⁵ Ibid, 68.

⁶ Ibid, 68.

⁷ Newman B., op. cit. 1030.

⁸ Freud S., *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, New York, 1963, 212.

pretation of Medusa's head, actually, includes the terror of castration linked to the sight of female genitals. He further develops his assertion by pointing out that the virgin goddess Athena wears this symbol on her dress, rightly repelling sexual desire. However, in most literary representations, Medusa's power is presented in her staring eyes. Thus, regarding the subject-object position, it is Medusa's gaze that castrates – the awareness of her returned look may be understood as the refusal to be subjugated to the position of the object. "If the woman looks, the spectacle provokes, castration is in the air, the Medusa's head is not far off; thus, she must not look, is absorbed herself on the side of the seen".⁹ In other words, to exchange one's position of the subject for that of the object of the gaze is to relinquish one's power and control and to become emasculated. This is a potent sign of Rob and Laura's upcoming roles and relationship dynamics.

Later recounting the episode of their first encounter, he feels that Solomon Burke's song "Got to Get You Off My Mind" he plays is the key song in his seduction of her. Ironically, however, he fails to realize that he is not seducing her, but that it is the other way round – she asks for the song, knowing that it is one of his favorites. After she is left almost alone on the dance floor, she continues her play of seduction, feeling certain that she has captured his gaze, raised his interest. This perhaps explains why, even though he instinctively recognized her as a Medusa figure, he did not retreat or retire. From his point of view, he was controlling the situation.

The issue of control has a dominant place in his life.

"If I could only control the when and how of being dumped by somebody, then it wouldn't *seem* as bad. Then, of course, it wouldn't be rejection, would it? It would be by mutual consent. It would be musical differences. I would be leaving to pursue a solo career" (*italics mine*).¹⁰

When one controls the precise moment of the end of a relationship, then one is able to maintain the pre-

⁹ Heath S., *Difference, Screen*, 19, Glasgow, 1978, 88.

¹⁰ Hornby N., *op. cit.* 85.

tence. In just few short lines, Rob manages to jump from a position of the person being “dumped” to the one who is “leaving”. Even though, the reality of the break-up would not change (he would still be the one “dumped”), in other people’s eyes, and more importantly, in his own eyes, his reputation would *seem* unblemished. By giving excessive attention to the way he looks to others, Rob is actually putting great care into his image of masculinity. “Men are under the constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men’s approval. It is other men who evaluate the performance”.¹¹ In general culture, there are several areas where masculinity is most often demonstrated. One of them is the area of sexual relationships – the greater the number of sexual escapades, the more masculine the image. In Rob’s case, however, the focus is not on the number of relationships or on the experience he gained from them, but, rather, on the way each of them ended and how that affected him. The novel begins with a list of Rob’s top five most painful break-ups. Readers follow a story of chronologically ordered events in Rob’s love-life, from first adolescent intimacies at the playground, over his, if not more mature, then at least more experienced high school and college relationships, to a bitter, rebound liaison. The reason for this reminiscing is to show that all these relationships have a commonality – in all of them it was the girlfriend who broke up with him. Rob’s earlier relationships with girls, rather than being a symbol of his virility and a manly story for his mates, are germane to his future romances. Key issues of cuckoldry and infidelity, which were established during the early stages of his love life, resonate in his later relationships. The lesson that he takes out of the whole dating experience is that he is doomed to act out the same recurring chain of events which ultimately leads to him being rejected and single. As a rule, he is left after each break-up with a feeling of inadequacy, for all of his girlfriends reject him in favor of someone else. Ending up in a passive, object position as the one being left behind, he is further emasculated by the knowledge that he was compared with

¹¹ Magill D., *Masculinity in male-authored fiction, 1950-2000: keeping it up*, Middletown, 2005, 9.

another man, and that he was found wanting in comparison. It would, then, seem fairly masochistic to engage oneself once again in an act that would ultimately end in emasculation. Yet, Rob is adamant to either repair his relationship with Laura, or to begin anew with someone else. The reason for this is that for Rob, single status, as opposed to the sexually aggressive and adventurous men, actually mainly relates to loneliness. This is most evident in the scene with “The Most Pathetic Man In The World”.¹² He too, like Rob, is out at the cinema with his parents on a Sunday night, where he recognizes in Rob a “*kindred spirit*” (italics in original).¹³ Far from seeing singlehood as a convenient state for gaining sexual experience, Rob feels that the main task of one’s partner is to save them from pitiful looks and from “the pit where the permanently single live with their mums and dads”.¹⁴ Loneliness and rejection, chief emotions connected with being single, as deeply private issues turn unbearable upon the prospect of becoming visible and seen.

A desire for invisibility

Marie LaSalle appears in the second section of the novel as a personification of Rob’s greatest snobbish fantasy – a prospect of a relationship with a musician. She arrives after his break-up with Laura and is immediately portrayed as a tantalizing figure. She is fairly accomplished, independent and sexually aggressive. Once again, he is not interested in a sexual encounter, but in a relationship with her.

“I’d want her to write songs at home, and ask me what I thought of them, and maybe include one of our private jokes in the lyrics, and thank me in the sleeve note”.¹⁵

Constantly aware of other people’s evaluating gazes, he feels empowered by the thought of what people would conclude about him from seeing him with a musician. Their romance is, however, short-termed,

¹² Hornby N., op. cit. 109.

¹³ Ibid, 110.

¹⁴ Ibid, 110.

¹⁵ Ibid, 49.

lasting only one night. On Rob's part, the relationship is not a case of seduction and conquest, but rather a timid and submissive surrender. The chosen setting is not his flat, but hers, placing him at the position of the spectator. This allows him to make conclusions about her lifestyle, her personality, her financial state, in short, to make her the spectacle, rather than be the one on display, the object of her gaze. Soon afterwards, however, self-consciousness takes over. Before the act even begins, he is already comparing himself to all other lovers she has ever had, believing he will prove inadequate. As consequence, he is paralyzed.

“Marie pushes me away so that she can have a look at me and, rather than let her see me gazing blankly into space, I squeeze my eyes tight shut”.¹⁶

Having started from the position of a spectator, he is now the spectacle, not even being capable of meeting her look. The deal is done – from there on, he will not be able to reassume the subject position, but will, instead, remain passive and apathetic. What is more, this means that he sees no future with her. He is not in this position for the first time, so he knows that he will ultimately be rejected in favor of someone else. However, she is still a musician, a symbol of his greatest fantasy. How can he reject the possible fulfillment of a dream? He can, because he has already imagined the relationship and virtually lived it. She is demystified, made common and ordinary. She is no longer Marie-the-musician, but Marie-the-sad-and-rejected. The relationship ends before it even has a chance to begin properly.

“I like Marie a lot, she's funny and smart and pretty and talented, but who the hell is she? (...) Surely there's a better, safer, more friendly place for me than this?”.¹⁷

Rob is once more expressing a desire to be kept safe, to be rescued and, above all, to belong. Social anthropologist Roger Callois¹⁸ suggests a possible mecha-

¹⁶ Ibid, 95.

¹⁷ Ibid, 101.

¹⁸ Callois R., *The Mask of Medusa*, trans. George Ordish, New York, 1974, 40-41.

nism for becoming a part of a social group. He points to certain instances of excessive visibility in the animal world when survival is not the primary objective of mimicry. If we are to assume that this aesthetic instinct is not superfluous, then it serves a certain function: disguise becomes a “mode of sociability”,¹⁹ the survival is given an extended definition, which would include concepts beyond the biological dimension. “Camouflage is the blending of an animal into the pattern, the environment; it is a search for invisibility. (...) With men too, invisibility is an ever recurring desire”.²⁰

For Rob, there are two social groups he desires to blend in with. One is minimal, comprised only of him and a woman. The second group is the infinite group of men, and it is his desire to pass off as one of them. Real men, those who are members of the club of real men, are not supposed to worry about their appearance. They are not supposed to question their own subjectivity. Acceptance into this club is earned by acting the same, by assuming a subject position, which function is to disguise – to allow the subject the luxury of not standing out. There is comfort and safety in the acceptance, for one receives validation from the entire group. In this respect, camouflage, or acting like the other members of the group, is an attractive endeavor because it makes one unmarked. How is one, then, to act in order to be accepted into the privileged group of masculine men? There seems to be a great deal of confusion and inconsistencies. Every subsequent generation of men feels an abrasion between the concepts of inherited manhood that is to be strived for and other experiences to which they try to fit their masculine ideals.

“I’m happy to be a bloke, I think, but sometimes I’m not happy being a bloke in the late twentieth century. Sometimes I’d rather be my dad. He never had to worry about delivering the goods, because he never knew that there were any goods to deliver; he never had to worry about how he ranked in my mother’s

¹⁹ Ibid, 75.

²⁰ Ibid, 87.

all-time one hundred, because he was first and last on the list”.²¹

Nonetheless, there are certain masculine ideals that are impervious to time. Eisler, Skidmore and Ward²² point out that, in order to be perceived as masculine, men need to be conquering in sex and work, prevail in situations which require fitness and strength, must not be perceived as emotional and thereby feminine and must repress tender emotions, since showing emotions is restricted in traditional masculine customs. Rob hardly qualifies in any of the requirements. His record-shop is not bringing any amount of money that would make others envy him and the work itself is not stimulating or interesting. Staying true to his impassive role, even though he knows his job is detrimental to his image, he does not act.

“Sometimes I look at my shop (...) and at my regular Saturday punters, and I know exactly how those residents of Pompeii must feel (...). I’m stuck in this pose, this shop-managing pose, for ever (...)”.²³

During the few weeks immediately after Laura left him, he takes great pride in the fact that she did not hurt him, and that their ended relationship had no greater significance in his life, so much so that it did not even make it to his top-five list of most painful break-ups. With regards to the criterion of repressed emotionality, this certainly qualifies him as manly. Emotional breakdown, nevertheless, inevitably arrives, and it is considerable and public. While watching Marie LaSalle perform for the first time, surrounded by audience consisting of mostly men, he bursts into tears to a Peter Frampton cover. This emasculating flood of emotions does not come, however, as a sudden realization of the lost love or some other similar feeling. It comes, in fact, after he learns that, once again, there is another man. Worse still, this other man is his former upstairs neighbor whom Rob dubbed “a demon lover”,²⁴ and “knowing that a

²¹ Hornby N., op. cit. 94

²² Eisler R., Skidmore J., Ward C., Masculine Gender-Role Stress: Predictor of Anger, Anxiety and Health-Risk Behaviours, *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 52(1), Toledo: OH, 1988, 133-141.

²³ Hornby N., op. cit. 19.

²⁴ Ibid, 58.

successor is better in bed is impossible to take”.²⁵ His tears are, thus, the tears of rejection and humiliation.

Aware of the fact that he is unable to mimic these external manifestations of masculinity, he is socially excluded from the group of successful, self-actualized men. Ironically, however, he does not realize that these manifestations are subordinate to a man’s own sense of masculinity and, hence, subjectivity. This can, perhaps, best be illustrated by going back to the position of a DJ in which Rob felt happiest and most comfortable. While it is true that in his DJ booth he was removed from the dance-floor and was in a perfect position for gazing at people, at the same time he was, reciprocally, in the most prominent position in the entire club. While there are many people dancing, there is only one DJ, who is being evaluated both for his taste in music and the ability to combine songs so that the dance-floor is never empty, as well as for his physical appearance. The job was not prestigious, it did not pay much, and still Rob felt the most masculine in his life. The reason for this is that, during that time, he never once questioned his subjectivity, he never once thought that he was out of place. Self-doubt arises when he wonders what visual and auditory perception others have of him, or in other words, when he starts to analyze his own objectness. As consequence, he cannot act out masculinity and is left out of the group he desires to blend in with. As a way of repairing this, Rob creates his own microcosm in which he can stand on the side-line, blending in with the décor of the shop and, if prompted to step up, assume a position of mastery and control, because of his infinite knowledge of music and trivia. Again, the issue of control assumes a central position in his interpretation of masculinity. The area in which he is able to regain control is music and the place is his shop, Championship Vinyl. There, he surrounds himself with people who are like him, creating his own group of men, as a substitute for the one which he was denied access to. He can, finally, *act like others* and become unmarked.

This microcosm is governed by a different set of rules. Music is the only currency and a token of “same-sex

²⁵ Ibid, 58.

friendship and homo-social male bonding”.²⁶ Besides being the most important signifier in his relations with other men, music is relevant for his relations with women. After numerous rejections and disappointments in his earlier relationships, in his adult years he finds a new way of conversing with women – through his compilation tapes. His cassettes tell a story.

“To me, making a tape is like writing a letter – there’s a lot of erasing and rethinking and starting again. (...) You’ve got to kick off with a corker, to hold the attention (...) and then you’ve got to up it a notch, or cool it a notch, and you can’t have white music and black music together, unless the white music sounds like black music, and you can’t have two tracks by the same artist side by side, unless you’ve done the whole thing in pairs and ... oh, there are loads of rules”.²⁷

This is actually his narrative, with songs as his voice. By carefully ordering songs, “rethinking and starting again”, he is making sure that the message is received the way he intended – he is controlling the woman’s perception of the narrative, directing her probing gaze. After Rob and Laura meet for the first time, he promises to make for her a cassette which would include the Burke song, which has overt seductive overtones. Cassette, thus, becomes his mediator, a way of keeping away in the safe distance, avoiding her returning look. During their entire relationship he keeps giving her compilations, not as a selfless gesture for the person he loves, but with a calculated intent. This becomes evident when she moves out. She does not take any of his gifts because, as she points out, they are all from the period “when you were trying to turn me into you”.²⁸ Laura’s song request during their first encounter raises interest in Rob, for he recognizes much of his own music taste in her. “In every choice of a love-object the libidinal energy is al-

²⁶ Keskinen M., (2005), *Single, Long-Playing and Compilation: The Formats of Audio and Amorousness in Nick Hornby’s High Fidelity*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 47(1), Washington DC, 2005, 14.

²⁷ Hornby N., op. cit. 69.

²⁸ Ibid, 160.

ways borrowed from the ego, and always ready to return to it".²⁹ He wants to mould her into someone who would share his music interest, into someone he can easily love.

His proposal to Laura, with whom he eventually reunites, is the first act he does in order to push the story/his life forward. It is impossible to say whether this change is permanent or not – he has declared at least once before that he is “a different person”.³⁰ The very end, however, may be more revealing. He is back at the DJ position, comparing the scene in front of him to an ending of a film he has been watching. He is identifying himself with the cinematic gazer, which is the quintessential *immasculating* position, finally feeling comfortable with his sex/gender role.

High Fidelity – the film

Though the numerous song titles in the novel trigger an immediate and rich auditory association for the main character and act as a kind of a spokesperson for his current state of mind, for the less-knowing reader they are little more than mere strings of words. Building up from the narrative, it is a privilege of *High Fidelity*, the film, to add the auditory dimension to the story and the character and provide its audience, upon hearing the sounds from artists such as Belle and Sebastian, The Beta Band and The Velvet Underground, with the complete experience.

The story is, for the most part, faithful to the novel. John Cusack, portraying the character of Rob, narrates in the form of on-screen, straight-to-camera monologues. Rob assumes the same affected role of a self-assured, cynical man he does in the novel, effectively placing himself in the position of a mediator, filtering the audience's perceptions, so that he is certain that he is “the kingpin of all he surveys”.³¹ In terms of the theory of gaze, this mechanism of subjectification provides Rob with the masculine position of a spectator, which he could otherwise occupy with

²⁹ Laplanche J. and Pontalis J., *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, London, 1980, as quoted in Frow J., op. cit. 242.

³⁰ Hornby N., op. cit. 184.

³¹ <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/385>, last updated: 27th June 2007, accessed: 31st July 2009.

great difficulty. Furthermore, this staged confidence represents a conscious effort to appeal to the maturity of the audience who should see through it and discover a helpless adolescent. In other words, this serves as a way of manipulating the audience into warming up to Rob.

The world of Chicago's Championship Vinyl, much the same as its London counterpart from the novel, is emphatically a male world. There, Rob is the "unchallenged taste-meister, mapping out the parameters of acceptable and unacceptable music, gently shepherding customers towards records they did not come in to buy, but he knows will enrich their lives".³² Women are intruders, so much so that they are not allowed a proper characterization, but are diminished to one-dimensional punch lines of jokes or prospects of a fulfilment of male fantasies. This is rightly so, for it is through the filter of Rob's eye and mind that we see them. The only female character that approaches the roundness of most male characters in the film is Laura. She assumes the role of a grounded mother-figure, of someone who will help Rob realize the truth behind his snobbish, adolescent fixations and, consequently, grow up. She is, in this respect, a figure of authority, intimidating and potentially emasculating. There is infinitely much more understanding for the male characters, for it is from each other that they draw approval and gain security. This is also evident in the absence of any real critique of their style of life and their philosophy.

The only added subplot to the story deals with Rob's involvement in managing a pair of young skaters/grunge musicians. Though it may seem that it only functions as a way of widening the targeted audience, it, nevertheless, contributes to a notably different ending: the new circumstances leading up to Rob's final sense of imasculation are a result of his own actions, rather than being the result of a "late birthday present"³³ from Laura, as they are in the novel. In this respect, the film offers a more promising perspective. Indeed, combined with Stevie Wonder's up-

³² Ibid.

³³ Hornby N., *op. cit.* 229.

beat song “I Believe”, the film ends on an undeniably optimistic note.

Conclusion

There is a great paradox in the concept of masculinity – men gain validation from other men who evaluate their performance, and yet to show that one cares about his masculine image is to be perceived as feminine. Camouflage becomes a very important mechanism for asserting one’s subjectivity – it is designed to disguise. However, subjectivity is a frail concept. The crisis takes place once the subject realizes that he is both the surveyor and the surveyed, in looking at oneself through the implied gaze of others. This is always connected with the idea that the gaze is omnipresent, not belonging either to the subject or to the object. In a patriarchal society, a gaze is a way in which men assert their dominance over women. If a woman does look, it is to validate the man. In a democratic society, the gender-explained categories of subject and object are discourse and context bound constructs, rather than biological, and are in connection with relations of power signification. The issue of control is dominant.

Rob is, in the end, triumphantly back in the DJ position, where he is both the supervisor and the controller. Immasculated by this new sense of power, he starts thinking of a new compilation for Laura, one which would contain the things she likes. He feels secure about relinquishing his attempts to re-mould her, and hence, control her. This is only seemingly so, because the compilation is his narrative to her, a version of her favorite songs that is mediated by him.