

# Women's Fightback



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[www.workersliberty.org/women](http://www.workersliberty.org/women)

## Why we defend abortion rights

### Rosie Woods answers frequently asked questions about the current threats to abortion rights

#### What is all the fuss about? Women have the right to choose to have an abortion in the UK don't they?

No, women do not have the right to choose!

First, though Northern Ireland is part of the UK the 1967 Abortion Act does not apply there. Nowhere in the island of Ireland do women have access to safe, legal abortion.

Abortion law is very limited: usually abortion is available only up to 24 weeks and has to be agreed to by two doctors using strict criteria.

Abortion is only available if continuation of a pregnancy would cause more harm than a termination.

Later abortions, up to term, are legally allowed only if there is risk of death or grave injury to the woman, or if there are serious foetal abnormalities.

This cumbersome procedure puts pressure on women to question their reasons for wanting a termination; it also enables the one in 10 doctors morally opposed to *all* abortion to undermine and obstruct women seeking abortion.

Women who, for whatever reason, have not obtained or are unable to obtain a termination, and induce a miscarriage are criminalised under the Offences Against the Person Act and can be charged with manslaughter or murder.

Finally, the rights we have are not secure; they are under constant attack and have already been eroded with a reduction in time limits from 28 to 24 weeks in 1990.

#### There are legal limits on abortion but at least women have access to abortion on the NHS, don't they?

In 2011 96% of UK abortions were carried out under the NHS. However, there are variations in regional funding and waiting times vary a lot.

In normal circumstances a woman must first go to her GP then await a referral to a clinic or hospital. There she attends an initial consultation and is booked in for a termination.

This is a long process and it is not unusual for women to wait for three weeks for an NHS abortion.

For some the delay wipes out the possibility of having a medical abortion; beyond a certain point women must undergo a more intrusive and unpleasant surgical procedure.

Marie Stopes International, which holds NHS contracts to provide local abortion services in many parts of the country, will accept a referral from one telephone call and aim for a woman to receive a termination within 48 hours.

But mainstream NHS standards can be poor; women who do not live in an area with specialist clinics or who cannot afford to pay for a speedy abortion will have to wait.

#### Without safeguards couldn't vulnerable women be forced into abortion against their will?

One of the arguments anti-abortionists use is that many women are coerced into having an abortion by family, partners or even their employers; and that they face threatened or actual violence to make them comply.

The anti-abortionists conveniently forget that many women are forced by family or partners to continue with unwanted pregnancies.

We are not pro-abortion, we are pro-choice. Action to defend women's right not to face violent coercion in any form is part of our campaign for freedom of choice.

#### Shouldn't there be safeguards against terminations being carried out on the basis of gender?

Large numbers of terminations are carried out across the globe because of gender preference. Many of these are in countries with a very strong preference for male children. In China this has been exacerbated by the one-child policy.



#### Irish pro-choice demonstration

The problem here is that for many families the child's gender has serious financial implications; the termination of female foetuses is inextricably linked to poverty, financial conventions in marriage, and cultural attitudes to women.

In India sex identification is illegal. However, if this were strictly enforced the result would be more violence against women who bear unwanted girls and more murders of female infants. Any successful prevention of women from accessing terminations based on gender (i.e. through heavy state intervention) will not stop those terminations taking place but will only force women into unsafe procedures.

We are for a woman's right to choose, whatever her motivation, although we would simultaneously work towards a world in which women are considered equal to men and bearing a female child would not be considered a failure.

#### In a similar vein, isn't termination based on foetal abnormality disableist?

There are many different foetal abnormalities which can be identified prior to birth. Some mean a child has a very poor prognosis and shortened life, some will need serious medical intervention in the early years or longer, or that the child will have a long term physical or mental disability.

An individual woman's capability and desire to become a parent to a child which might have long term and demanding physical or special needs will be unique to them.

We live in a world that disables people further and where support services are nonexistent or stretched.

Every parent should be a willing parent and every child should be a wanted child. If a woman does not wish to have a child with a disability then that choice should be respected.

That decision has no bearing on the rights and services children and adults with disabilities living in the world should enjoy.

To fully support a woman's right to choose we must also campaign for society to properly support families with children with disabilities.

#### Shouldn't questions about foetal pain and viability be taken into account? Shouldn't there be some upper limit?

A key part of the anti-abortionists' argument for reducing the time limits for abortion rests on foetal viability, that is, the age at which the foetus can survive outside of the womb. The current consensus is that below 24 weeks babies very rarely survive. What if they could?

We need to go back to the basis of pro-choice thinking. We are for a woman's right to choose whether she wishes to become a parent and we are for every child to be a wanted child. From this standpoint, the question of foetal viability is simply not relevant to the question of abortion.

In fact, even when babies are born extremely prematurely, they do not just survive unaided. They are viable only because of medical intervention, and the driving force for that medical intervention is the desperate wish of the parents for their wanted child to survive.

Even so, discussions are had about prognosis with parents and in some cases interventions which could be made are not because the parents do not wish to continue.

To impose an upper limit is to enforce a cut-off point for a woman to choose if she wants to become a mother and it turns the woman into an incubator for the unwanted unborn child.

Most important, though, is that emotive arguments about late abortion are used by those who oppose *all* abortion in order to sway opinion to their side.

The facts are these: in 2011 there were 189,931 abortions in the UK. Of these, 78% were performed before 10 weeks, 91% before 13 weeks and 98% before 20 weeks. Only 136 were performed after 24 weeks and only 26 of these at 32 weeks.

There are many reasons why women have late abortions. These include: presenting late for assessment, so abnormalities are not detected early on; the women's circumstances change; they have been hiding an unwanted pregnancy, etc.

We want services that are accessible to women and allow them to get an abortion as early as possible — the safest and least distressing course for a woman. But we must demand that women have access to abortion as late as necessary so that they have a full choice.

#### The anti-abortionists are in a minority. What harm can they do?

Surveys show that the majority of people in the UK support a woman's right to have an abortion within the current law.

Those opposing *all* abortion are a minority but the later the abortion the more tenuous levels of support become, which makes the campaigning activities of anti-abortionists very dangerous.

They use emotive pictures and arguments as well as smears and lies about abortion providers in order to cause hysteria about termination. The hope is to affect legislation.

Recently we have also seen an increase in US-style intimidatory tactics by anti-abortion groups such as SPUC and Abort67 outside abortion clinics. These people accost women going for a termination and subject them to emotional battery by showing posters of late-term foetuses and allegedly film women entering clinics.

**It is vital that the feminist and pro-choice movement combats these people and that we are not complacent about the level of threat they pose.**

● Abortion Rights: <http://www.abortionrights.org.uk/>

# The Marxes: labours of love

Janet Burstall reviews *Love and Capital* by Mary Gabriel. New York, Little, Brown, 2011

**"Most people would come away shocked at what a moderate [Marx] was ... if they read what Marx actually wrote."**

So says Mary Gabriel, of people who would see Marx as (unjustifiably) responsible for the atrocities of the 20th century, committed in the name of communism.

Mary Gabriel places Marx during the events about and for which he wrote, including the 1848 revolutions and the Paris Commune, and tells of his irreplaceable contribution to the International Working Men's Association, afterwards known as the First International. But Marx was constantly torn between his devotion to his primary mission — the writing of a great work on political economy (that would become *Capital*), and the need to organise and respond to events of the moment.

Marx was also personally devoted to his wife Jenny, and their children, and this web of love and loyalty, with its tensions, was a critical part of Marx's labour in writing *Capital*. Mary Gabriel had planned to write a biography of the three Marx daughters, but found that their lives were so related to the work of their father, that her book grew to encompass Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, their mother Jenny, and family friend and housekeeper Lenchen. The book depicts the oppression that women suffered, alongside the relatively enlightened attitudes of the Marxes about women in 19th-century Europe, and

writes women into the history of the writing of *Capital*.

Marx studied, argued and debated at university. He researched and wrote assiduously, and repeatedly claimed to be only weeks away from completing his book. But it was 16 years after he started writing before the publication of *Capital* Volume 1 in 1867, which covered industry "microscopically". Yet there was a sense of anti-climax for all the Marxes, who had to wait several more years before *Capital* received much attention. To their surprise it was in Russia where it first found a wide readership.

When a publisher's deadline approached Marx's painful carbuncles would break out. When he was meant to be writing *Capital*, he would study another topic, learn to read another language. When his family was around him, he suggested that they distracted him, but when they were away he couldn't concentrate. Marx relished his children. He wrote several chapters of *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in 1852 whilst playing at being "steeple chaser of his three small children" who had harnessed him to chairs as a pretend stage coach.

Marx was absolutely in love with Jenny, and remained so all his life, according to his daughters. His radical education began at the age of 14, learning from Jenny's father of utopian socialism and to appreciate Shakespeare. But he kept Jenny waiting during a seven-year engagement while he studied. Years later in 1851, during Jenny's absence, he fathered a child, Freddie Demuth, with

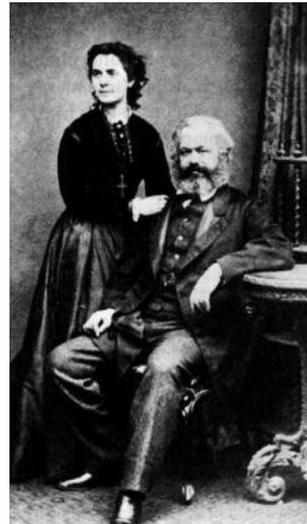
Lenchen, the family housekeeper and close friend, then concealed this with Engels claiming paternity. Mary Gabriel presents a persuasive case that Marx, not Engels is Freddie's father, disagreeing with previous biographers.

**CONVENTIONAL**  
The Marx household was anything but conventional in the Victorian era, however much effort was expended to maintain as best as possible the appearances of bourgeois respectability.

The constant debts and the reliance of the family on Engels are well covered in other biographies. Mary Gabriel puts this in the context of bringing up the Marx daughters. Karl and Jenny wanted to establish their social and marriage prospects, and save them from repeating the tribulations of their parents. The daughters were sent to good schools, where they excelled, and where there were fees to be paid.

Whenever there was a windfall, the money would be spent quickly, for example on moving to a better house, on new clothes, or trips. On one occasion they were able to afford to host an elegant party for the young women's friends. But the girls accepted that they could not afford the clothing and social outings of their school friends. They were all aware of the cost of a life spent against the current dedicated to revolutionary ideas and actions.

The daughters were intellectually advanced, in languages and literature, as well as politics. There was a constant stream of political



Jenny von Westphalen and Karl Marx

visitors and conversation in the house. Major and often eccentric figures of 19th-century revolutionary thought and of the German Social Democratic Party passed through the Marx household, and were wittily and perceptively observed by the Marx women.

In 1857, at the ages of 11 and 13, respectively, Jennychen and Laura "began their long careers as Marx's assistants". Later Laura and Tussy (Eleanor) accompanied Marx to the British Museum Library to work with him. Eleanor at age 16 handled much of Marx's correspondence in French, German and English, with people such as Wilhelm Liebknecht, and the Russian translator of *Capital*.

Jennychen and Laura both took up the cause of Irish independence, with Laura's understanding heightened through Engels' Manchester connection. Jennychen's series of eloquent letters to the press (under a pseudonym) in 1869 prompted a parlia-

mentary inquiry into the detention of Irish political prisoners, and in 1870 she learned that "her words had freed men". Eleanor did not have children, so had more scope for politics than her sisters. She was a leading agitator for Marx's ideas in the last three decades of the 19th century, including in the trade union struggles of 1889. Mary Gabriel's three-page account of the London dock workers' victory is worth reading on its own.

Despite their capabilities, commitment and radicalism, every one of the women of the Marx household suffered from the intense subordination of women at the time. All but Tussy bore children in difficult circumstances when they may have not have if they had had the choice. Four of Karl's and Jenny's children died young. Mary Gabriel says that these losses set Marx back, and she explores his guilt for not having provided better living conditions for his family, which may have saved his children.

The two oldest daughters, Jennychen and Laura, married French revolutionaries Paul Longuet and Paul Lafargue, and did relive their parents' struggles. Both men neglected their wives at critical times in the lives of their infants, sometimes while on political business in support of Marx. Laura lost all three of her babies and never recovered emotionally. All three daughters' lives ended tragically.

Eleanor spoke up specifically for the emancipation of women. Yet she remained committed for decades to a man who treated her very badly indeed. Engels tried to support Eleanor by defend-

ing her de facto husband, possibly partly as a defence of her right to buck convention, as he had done himself by living with working class women, first Mary Burns, then her sister Lizzie, and without marrying.

It was not only Marx's wife and daughters who directly assisted his intellectual endeavours. Engels' mighty effort to complete volumes 2 and 3 of *Capital* after Marx's death are written about in other biographies, but Mary Gabriel adds to the account how Engels worked with tensions between Laura and Eleanor over Marx's literary estate.

Mary Gabriel has written a larger than life story of a larger-than-life, decades-long labour of love by Marx and his extended family to produce *Capital* as a critique of the boom and bust, productivity and misery that is the capitalist system. Marx edited newspapers whose funding was withdrawn, was exiled several times, hounded by creditors, attacked by political opponents and distraught by the loss and suffering of Jenny, his children and grandchildren.

By turning to the women's perspective Mary Gabriel has produced a biography of Marx that would make a more compelling TV series than "Homeland" or "The Killing".

**Love and Capital may motivate women and men who have not read any of Marx's work to understand the context of his work afresh, and so to learn more about its continuing relevance by reading it in the original.**

## The S Word

**A FEMINIST CONVERSATION ABOUT SEX AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION**

**Organised by Feminist Fightback**

**Sunday 17 February 11am-4pm at the Whitmore Community Centre, 2-4 Phillip Street, London, N1 5NU.**

**Registration details: [www.feministfightback.org.uk](http://www.feministfightback.org.uk)**

# Feminism, love and Twilight

By Kat Wall

**What does it mean to be a feminist heroine in the 21st century? What does it mean to be a feminist? What does it mean to be a woman?**

These were the rather big questions that were going around my brain as I sat watching "Breaking Dawn: Part Two", the last instalment of the Twilight Saga.

According to some, "Twilight" is a story of female empowerment. In this last film, the heroine Bella Swan becomes a vampire, can fight to the death, and is

stronger and faster than many of the men that surround her.

Is this what it takes to be a feminist heroine? Who knows.

There are certainly elements of the rest of the films that make me think twice: before becoming a vampire, Bella requires rescuing from a number of terrors, in true damsel-in-distress fashion. The thought of her having a career or going to college is ignored. Her sole purpose is to marry Edward — the vampire and love of her life. The whole story revolves

around the consolidation of their relationship and the trials they must face before they can live happily ever after.

**ROMANCE**  
To stop the rant in mid-flow, I want to ask the question, where do romance and love and happily-ever-after fit into feminism?

I rail against the myths propagated by Walt Disney as much as the next person. Preaching to young girls that their sole aspiration should be to find a good, wealthy man makes me want to kick things. But is

love in some way anti-feminist? If we compromise for a partner, if that partner is a man, are we letting the sisterhood down? If we choose domestic life and marriage are we bad feminists? Is there a place for "traditional female roles" in the feminist discourse?

I imagine the main reason "Twilight" got me in a muddle about all these things is because actually we don't know what it means to be a woman in the 21st century. I am not advocating that we write down a list of qualities and hold women accountable to

them. But I am raising the issue. When critics proclaim films and literature to be "feminist" or "anti-feminist", debates still rage about the validity of these claims. Why? Because does becoming physically stronger than a man equal empowerment? Does sacrificing everything for love make you un-feminist?

**This is a call for a discussion about the role of love in feminism. I don't know the answer, but I do know I was smiling when Bella and Edward got their happy-ever-after.**

# Historic moment for India?

By Camila Bassi

**On the evening of 16 December 2012, a young female student on a Delhi bus was gang-raped.**

Less than a fortnight later she died of her injuries. After new reports came out, something extraordinary happened: a layer of young, urban, educated, middle class people protested, others joined, and the demonstrations sustained, evolved and escalated.

The early response of the Indian government was active disengagement, force — batons, tear gas, water cannons — and more conniving efforts to crush the protesters' spirit (the woman was moved to Singapore, her funeral was hastily managed).

But, after the woman's death, as the protesters persisted and international media picked up, the Janus-faced leaders attempted to co-opt the demonstrations and publicly promised change.

## WHY NOW? WHY THIS CASE?

**Some might speculate (with healthy cynicism) that the outrage happened because the victim was part of the "respectable middle class"; after all, no similar response was likely to have been triggered by the rape of a Dalit or tribal woman.**

And yet this misses something rather crucial. Yes, perhaps in some minds there was a gulf between "Us" (the protesters at Raisina Hill) and "Them" (four of the six accused came from the Ravi Das slum area), thus mirroring India's political and social consciousness, imbued with class and caste stratification. Nevertheless, the anger from this Delhi gang rape has also ruptured the standard hierarchy of judgement.

In other words, for a lot of people her background did not matter.

What's more, the "participation in these protests has cut across class barriers, something seldom seen in the country's public spaces", Vaishna Roy comments, and:

"Reviled for its elitism, its disconnect from the grassroots and its insularity, the middle-class is finally being seen as willing to dirty its hands, to join the fray..."

The protests surrounding this tragic event have become a tipping point in India. The point of historic significance is that a space has been opened up by an unprecedented wave of public demonstration in which to name, challenge and debate rape and the wider societal issue of oppressive gender and sexual relations.

This space is fragile and momentary, but it contains vitally important steps forward. Neha Dixit observes:

"For the first time, we heard words like 'patriarchy' being discussed on the streets and in the mainstream media. In juxtaposition, the machismo of certain men was manifested in the forms of protests, where young boys displayed stunts on moving bikes with 'hang the rapists, save our sisters' placards... It is then, young girls displayed placards in opposition saying, 'I don't need to be someone's daughter or sister to move freely on the street.' This at least created a space to ask uncomfortable questions."

Returning to the issue of why now, the political economy of India gives us one answer.

## POLITICAL ECONOMY, PATRIARCHAL CULTURE

*"The men (and even some women in positions of power) who lead India are successfully able to de-link the celebratory stories of neoliberalism, militarisation, nationalism, growth and development from the toleration of sexual violence as a sport, a commodity, as collateral damage, or a necessary technique to suppress women's autonomy ... Alas, the brutality that Delhi witnessed is the effect of the toleration and celebration of rape cultures in India."*

(Pratiksha Baxi)

**There is some merit to the feminist academic Nancy Fraser's understanding of capitalism as "specialized economic relations that are relatively decoupled from the relations of kinship and political authority", such that the link between the accumulation of surplus value, on the one hand, and the mode of sexual regulation, on the other, becomes reduced in force.**

She concludes that "contemporary capitalist society



Anti-rape protester in Delhi

contains 'gaps': between the economic order and the kinship order; and between the family and personal life; and between the status order and the class hierarchy".

It seems to me that, in one sense, the victim of the 16 December Delhi gang rape tragically represents the precarious attempt to simply exist within the gaps, or spaces, opened up by the development of capitalist social relations, which violently come up against pervasive patriarchal, misogynistic culture.

As Ratna Kapur argues, "with the opening up of the market, women are more visible in the workplace":

"That they are entering male bastions of power has challenged the sense of superiority and entitlement of the traditional Indian male. This idea of a woman as a fully formed human subject remains a difficult concept to embrace ... Son preference simultaneously erodes the possibility of respect for women, as girls are seen as unwanted or burdensome. Such inequalities produce the very hatred against women in the public arena that we are witnessing throughout the country."

What makes the Indian political economy and its relationship to global capital particular in nature is its

collision with religious traditions and kinship practices and caste and status stratification.

If we define globalisation as time-space compression, then 21st-century India takes this definition to a new level, since its space occupies several centuries at once.

Son preference, under-age marriage, arranged marriage, dowry demands, gender unequal malnutrition, female foeticide, female infanticide, sex-trafficking, violence against women, rape — all form part of a legitimated and normalised patriarchy. As such, much opposition to rape has tended not to come out of a primary concern for the victim but rather out of the deep-seated idea that a woman's body is the repository of family honour.

Nilanjana Roy states, there is an epidemic of violence against women in India: "This culture where if we can't kill off our girls before they are born, we ensure that they live these lives of constant fear."

Owen Jones is a well-respected, high profile socialist political commentator. His audience is pretty sizeable so what he says matters.

On 30 December 2012 he published an article in *The Independent* titled "Sexual

violence is not a cultural phenomenon in India — it is endemic everywhere".

He later stated, on his Twitter site, that the title was not of his choosing. Fine. Let's discuss the substance of his actual words:

"It's always comforting to think — despite everything that the 20th century should have taught us — that those who commit vile acts are sub-human, are not like us, so we can create emotional distance from them."

## EAST

**Owen is cautioning against an Orientalist-type racism in which "Us in the West" feel superior to "Them in the East":**

"It's comforting to think that this is someone else's problem, a particular scandal that afflicts a supposedly backward nation. It is an assumption that is as wrong as it is dangerous."

"Shocked by what happened in India? Take a look at France..." "Shocked? Again, let us Brits not get all high and mighty, either."

Owen doesn't want people in the West to be complacent, he wants men to show solidarity with women and to "challenge prejudice in our ranks."

Fair enough, I agree. However, what Owen downplays is the distinc-

tiveness of Indian patriarchal culture — fused with and fuelled by growing religious fundamentalisms — and its intersection with capitalist social relations.

Patriarchy, misogyny, rape, violence against women, yes, all of this is universal, but we must also recognize that in countries across the world (north, south, east and west) the natures, degrees, differences and specificities are a big deal.

Hasan Suroor in *The Hindu* assesses the arguments made by Western-based academics against (what they deemed) culturally superior British media coverage on this case.

Hasan concludes:

"Poor though Britain's record on punishing sex offenders may be, the fact remains that the streets of major British cities are much safer for women than Indian metros. What happened in Delhi on the night of December 16 will not happen in London. And that's a big deal. Ask any woman."

On Owen's geography, on his East-West dichotomy, I actually wonder about the Indian diaspora here. Does he?

I vividly remember the British Sikh protesters back in 2004 who succeeded in banning a play due to be shown at the Birmingham Rep written by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti. The play was called "Behzti", or "Dishonour", and it depicted a rape in a gurdwara.

On the Left, the cultural relativists supported the play's cancellation "out of respect". It seems to me, Owen's response in his newspaper column was a knee-jerk inversion of cultural relativism drawn from the same source: postcolonial guilt.

It is worth remembering that India's political religious leaders are united in a common prejudice against women, and, as M J Akbar astutely cautions:

"When they blame the West, they are not fearful of geography; they are terrified of modernity. Modernity is not singing English songs and wearing jeans. That is a cartoon view."

**"Modernity is equality, political and social. India has taken only the first steps towards that horizon ... Change is visible, but the long war has merely begun."**

# Here's looking at you

By Ellie Clarke

The idea of "male gaze" flows from a psychoanalytical/philosophical theory brought into wider use by Jacques Lacan, but it is a huge subject and difficult to summarise.

According to this theory, and to put it at its most crude, the "gaze" is the relationship between the subject's desire to look and the knowledge that one can also be viewed. The idea is that in our desire to look, we realise we can be looked upon. Then we lose some of our ability to govern our own behaviour; this process is tied into the idea of ego. We change our behaviour in accordance with who we wish to be.

Gaze theory involves thinking about power relations. For instance, *the gazed* in the relationship is a passive entity forced to self-regulate. The *gaze* may refer to a real situation, but because it is primarily a state of understanding it can also exist in an imagined state of surveillance.

The *male gaze* was discussed by Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). Mulvey argues that while looking at most cinematic images of women we are actually seeing them through the eyes of men in control of the cameras. The woman is a passive and often eroticised object.

She is often passive on two levels — first, to the male protagonist in the film and, second, to us.

An obvious, clichéd example is of a woman stepping out of the sea in a bikini. First, the man is shown gazing upon her, then we view her in the same way. The camera pans up her body, lingering over her hips and breasts before settling on her face.

The power relation in *male gaze* is different to the power relation in *gaze*. In *gaze*, to a certain extent, we are able to shape how we want to be seen. Although the reaction is involuntary the material consequence can be planned. But in the case of *male gaze* the camera not only controls how we view, it also regulates how we are presented. The gazed in the shot becomes not only an object of the *male gaze* but controlled purely by the male ego and how he wishes to view her.

Another example is the magic hallway scene in the TV series "Scrubs", in the "My Changing Ways" episode (series 4 episode 25). The scene starts with J.D. in conversation with two men. All three of the men are dominant in the shot. They are all in focus and in the foreground. In the background the majority of the extras are women; they are all out of focus. The only male extra is in the centre ground and completely in focus.

Next J.D. is walking down the corridor and the camera is focused on him. Again all the females are out of focus and in background. The few males in the scene are in focus and cen-



Ursula Andress as Honey Rider in "Dr. No". The dialogue is revealing — Honey Ryder: "Are you looking for shells too?" James Bond: "No, I'm just looking."

tre ground. When we finally have two women in focus they are purely there to be gazed upon.

Next J.D. looks at them, then the camera films them from his point of view. We look on as the two women, unaware they are being watched, act as a sideshow to J.D.'s monologue. Next the *gaze* is placed on a man and woman. The woman is passive to the *gaze* of the male talking to her, is passive and oblivious to J.D. and passive to our *gaze*. It's worth saying my choice here is random — I picked the first TV show that came to my head and watched a clip.

## LOOKING DOWN

What about a scene where a woman has to be the focus? Do we still view her through male eyes?

Probably the most commonly used camera angle trick is designed to keep the woman the centre of focus without giving any of the power over to her. The above/below technique is almost always used in scenes where a woman and man have to act together.

I tested this by typing "EastEnders" into YouTube. The first clip that came up was the famous scene where Frank turns up at Pat's door completely naked except for a spinning bowtie (2000). Even with the thematic premiss that the male will be the object of *gaze* it's not what we get. Every single shot of Pat is filmed from above as if we are looking down on her. Frank is filmed from below. These angles make her appear smaller and slimmer than she actually is.

It is no secret that Tom Cruise is a small man. However, he never appears on screen as the small man he is. He wears heels, he is always filmed from below, his leading ladies are already small and filmed from above, and his stunt doubles are always very tall men.

Speaking as a proud glamazonian woman, who stands at 5 ft 8 inches, with shoulders like an N.F.L. player and the kind of thighs that can choke a fully-grown man, I know well how this tall man/small woman image just isn't representative of the real population.

Do the use of these angles have an impact on our psyches?

Some people believe that constant viewing of woman from the ideal heterosexual male perspective has a subconsciously detrimental effect on how we all see women in society. Research suggests female politicians who are filmed using male gaze techniques are almost always seen as being intellectually inferior to their male counterparts and less able to deal with a position of responsibility. But this is by no means an uncontested point of view and the evidence is not conclusive.

Sometimes camera angle tricks may be used differently, on some women. The black feminist theorist Belle Hooks writes about how popular culture "others" black sexuality, turning it into something dangerous, exotic and animalistic. This is seen in the media's obsession with non-white women's butts.

Instead of just accepting that some woman have big butts, it is constantly portrayed as something alluring, abnormal and quintessentially black.



Beyoncé: a lot smaller in real life

After Beyoncé performed at Glastonbury, I heard reporters and friends alike say, "I was bowled over by how tiny she was. I was expecting a giant warrior woman; instead she was five foot nothing and petite." I have heard the same about Nicki Minaj and Rihanna. Honestly, I'm not really sure what this means, but in her videos Beyoncé does always look tall, athletic and powerful. I suspect if camera angles can be used to make women look physically inferior, they can also be used to make them look bigger and stronger.

## POST MODERNISM

I don't know how I feel about the *male gaze* as a theory. It is a huge thing with many different strands. Although we know looking and being looked at happens every day the theory around it is exactly that, theory. It's not based in hard science and is open to interpretation.

The paranoid part of my brain probably does believe that it has a negative impact on how we, as a society, view women. However, the rational part of my brain is forced to concede the evidence is not conclusive.

Also, the theory is a product of its time. From the 1970s through to the 90s, postmodernism was the big boy in the cultural playground, so for the most part this theory is mired in post-modern dross and that makes it very hard to take it seriously. Despite this, and most theorists' obsession with self and identity, I think there is something in it and we do have to ask some questions.

Why are we still excluding, marginalising and objectifying women? Why are we still letting visual media tell men and women what body normality is? While the arts are still dominated by men, it is not true that every director, every photographer and every camera operator is male, so this is a societal problem.

But, most of all, why are women in arts not challenging the way we are viewed.

## Student Feminist Conference 2013

Saturday 23-Sunday 24 February, ULU, Malet Street, London

Organised by London Student Feminist Societies Network

Details: [studentfems2013@gmail.com](mailto:studentfems2013@gmail.com); [www.studentfems2013.co.uk/](http://www.studentfems2013.co.uk/)

## Women's Fightback

Women's Fightback is a bimonthly socialist women's paper produced by members and supporters of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty.

We believe women's oppression is rooted in class society,



and can only be ended by overthrowing capitalism. At the same time, we do not tell women — or any oppressed group — to wait for the revolution. As socialist feminists, we see our job as reorienting the labour movement towards a fight for women's rights, and the women's movement towards class struggle.

Without the abolition of class exploitation, there can be no end to women's oppression. Without a mass movement of

organised, mobilised women fighting for liberation, there can be no socialist revolution. Neither is possible without the other.

Workers' Liberty women are active in the fight to transform the labour movement, and in many different campaigns — from reproductive freedom to migrant rights to the struggle against cuts. If you're a socialist feminist, please consider joining us — and, in the meantime, write for and distribute Women's

## Women's Fightback London discussion group

Meets first Friday of each month at University of London Union, Malet Street, WC1E

Next meeting: Friday 1 February, 7.30-9.30pm

Domestic violence, a socialist feminist perspective?

[women@workersliberty.org](mailto:women@workersliberty.org)