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Visibility Feminism

Alyssa Froehling

Augustana College - Rock Island

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Name: Alyssa Froehling

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"Our next question is: if you could have any superpower, what would it be?" I knew instantly how I would answer this question, no second thoughts required. As scraps of

conversation around me delved into flight and shape shifting and super speed, I wasn't swayed. Heads turned towards me. All confidence and tact, I said, "*I would choose invisibility.*" Those around me reacted favorably, murmuring amongst themselves about pranks and practical jokes, and when they asked me to explain why, I went along with them, stating it was because of the poltergeist persona I could use to scare my friends and family. That wasn't true though. I wanted the power of invisibility simply so I would not be visible. For as long as I can remember, I've had anxiety about being out in the world, in public, where pairs upon pairs of eyes could rest on me; sometimes these feelings of unrest become so strong I want to cease to exist, at least in a physical form. Often, occupying a body is exhausting to me. I am hyperaware of being perceived, and preoccupied with what these perceptions of me might entail. So, I try to practice control. I alter my appearance with makeup, chose clothes that give me the least amount of anxiety to wear (I wish I could say clothes that give me confidence, but this is simply not the case) so when I know I must be looked at, the apprehension is slightly less than it would be if I had stepped out into the public eye differently. "*Attract positive attention. Also, attract no attention at all,*" I tell myself. "*Don't bend over at the waist to pick something up, bend at the knees.*" "*Make sure you aren't walking funny.*" "*Don't look this man in the eye when he walks past and maybe he won't notice you.*" "*Don't turn your head down at that angle—that must be very unflattering.*" These are just a few of the hundreds of thoughts running through my head as I move throughout the world, constantly monitoring my corporal existence, worrying ceaselessly about both my movements and my static self.

For a long time, I thought that this internal monologue was something out of the ordinary, that my anxiety disorder had reached new, even more irrational heights. I was

completely destroying my ability to be, with my own mind. But I soon found I was not necessarily so trapped inside of myself as I thought—while scrolling through YouTube videos this winter, I stumbled upon a TedTalk by Caroline Heldman released in January of 2013 titled “The Sexy Lie.” In this speech, Heldman addresses the ever-prominent issue of sexual objectification, which, at the time, I did not directly connect with any of my anxieties. Then Heldman introduced a phenomenon I had never heard of before: “...the more we think of ourselves and internalize this idea of being sex objects, the higher our rates of depression. We also engage in habitual body monitoring much more when we view ourselves as sex objects” (Heldman). *Habitual body monitoring*. That term matched perfectly with what I catch myself so often doing; I never had the words to describe it until now.

Heldman continues, “What is habitual body monitoring? The men in the audience, this might be news to you. It is not news to the women in the audience. We think about the positioning of our legs, the positioning of our hair, where the light is falling, who’s looking at us, who’s not looking at us. In fact, in the five minutes that I’ve been giving this talk, on average, the women in this audience have engaged in habitual body monitoring 10 times. That is every 30 seconds” (Heldman). I realized I am not alone. Solely my own devices do not conceive my anxieties. Keeping it simple, I was born in a society in which I see women like me being constantly objectified. Therefore, I harbor a relentless fear of being objectified, and I know no matter what I do, I will be objectified. In this way, my body is taken away from me. I experience anxiety because I am simultaneously complying with standards of beauty designed to make me an object, but I am also terrified and

uncomfortable with being an object. After years of this dichotomy continuing, I reach points of exhaustion where I wish my body away.

To understand further how I am estranged from my own body and being, I wish to propose my own invented feminist theory, which I am calling visibility feminism. In this theory, I want to achieve a deeper understanding of a woman's feeling of separation from her own body, where this feeling comes from, what causes it. After identifying the roots of discomfort and disillusionment concerning the physical self, visibility feminism sets out to give women reasons to be visible, and what they can do to actively and comfortably reclaim their space, appetite, and ultimately, body. In short, the theory aims to define self-policing regarding the body, discern what causes this sort of self-policing, and then to search for possible ways to liberate women of self-policing.

The specific patriarchal systems of the aesthetic-obsessed Western culture are to blame for why many women are bombarded with images of other women in unattainable, objectified states. Historically, the dualism cultural system developed by the Ancient Greeks (which carried over into many Western cultural practices) associated men with rationality and intellect, "superior" attributes all related to the mind and consciousness. This left women with the "inferior" associations: physicality, chaos, hysteria (Wilshire 93-94). This provides explanation for why women are viewed just as bodies instead of bodies connected with consciousness, and why their value is derived more so from their appearances and bodily decisions (sex, motherhood, to name a few) versus their thoughts or knowledge. Evidence that this dualistic view of men and women still exists can be found everywhere, the media, entertainment, and personal lives. Eventually, the individual woman realizes the dehumanizing and objectifying ways women in general are viewed, and

where their worth is derived. They realize they have no say in changing this. This can manifest into terrible habitual behaviors, looping self-destructive thoughts, disorders, depression, death.

Long before Caroline Heldman's TedTalk was filmed and distributed all over the internet in 2013, feminist theorists wrote about the concept of habitual body monitoring without assigning it the same title. Postmodern feminist Sandra Lee Bartky's essay "Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power" originally published in 1988 describes the same phenomenon Heldman coins in her speech:

"The woman who checks her makeup half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara has run, who worries that the wind or the rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become...a self policing object, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance" (Bartky 81).

While Bartky calls it self-surveillance and Heldman habitual body monitoring, both are describing an issue that certain women deal with based on how they have been taught to view themselves. Need for feminists to address this issue arose with problematic societal views on certain women's appetite, sexuality, and body language (Bordo 18). To be the ideal "feminine" for many types of women is to be small, to uphold certain standards of appearance in order to be admired by men, whose opinion matters more than the opinion of the self. Therefore, men's opinions shape the self's aspirations in relation to the appearance and the physical modes of being. This is a large problem for some women. Socialized as such, they are never allowed to experience their bodies completely as their

own, but always analyzing themselves as if they were a spectator. This affects more than confidence, but also appetite, anxiety, sexuality, to name a few areas.

Habitual body monitoring/self-surveillance is a symptom of alienation from the self. This concept can be broken down to an even greater degree drawing from ideas of socialist feminist Alison Jaggar. Applying the socialist feminist lens, Jaggar compares women to waged workers and their bodies as a separate part of themselves, a product in which it is their job to work on:

“Women may insist that they diet, exercise, and dress only to please themselves, but in reality they most likely shape and adorn their flesh primarily for the pleasure of men. Moreover, women do not have final or total say about when, where, how, or by whom their bodies will be used, because their bodies can be suddenly appropriated from them through acts ranging from the ‘male gaze’ to sexual harassment to rape. Likewise, to the same degree that waged workers can be gradually alienated from themselves—their bodies begin to feel like things, mere machines from which labor power is extracted—women can gradually be alienated from themselves. To the degree that women work on their bodies—shaving their underarms, slimming their thighs and augmenting their breasts, painting their nails and coloring their hair—they may start to experience their bodies as objects or commodities. Finally, just as many waged workers are in competition with one another for their employers’ approbation and rewards, many women are in competition with one another for men’s approbation and reward” (Tong 110).

Once objectification and its implications are forced on a woman, objectification becomes part of her. She expects it. In some cases she is taught to desire it, that is an affirmation of

her worth. However, most detrimentally and disturbingly of all, she starts to do it to herself. Essentially, this is what habitual body monitoring is. Objectification of the self, learned through the treatment of others who are valued above her and images of others like her she is frequently exposed to.

Anxiety erupts over all facets of a woman's life as she objectifies herself. Aforementioned but not yet discussed in detail, self objectification, habitual body monitoring, and all the symptoms of being considered an object instead of a subject has the potential to deeply affect and impair a woman's quality of life:

“Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, make-up and dress—central organizing principles of time and space in the days of many women—we are rendered less socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self modification. Through these disciplines, we continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, insufficiency, of never being good enough” (Bordo 14).

This “not feeling good enough” is born through a combination of entities. Some women, socialized in Western culture, are conditioned to derive their worth out of two assets, both of which Bartky and Jaggar allude to: their appearance, and male attention. The patriarchal system has convinced them (as well as men) that there is one specific standard of beauty for a woman. It is important to note that this “ideal woman” is completely constructed out of the time period, similar to a fad in fashion. Since most women do not fit this standard, they become disillusioned regarding their bodies. Their bodies no longer exist as vessels to their consciousness for experience and pleasure, but rather a commodity separate from themselves they must constantly monitor and improve. Women are then more vulnerable to eating disorders, not necessarily because they are told to be obsessed with being thin,

but it can be a way to exercise control over their appearance when they feel they have none through constant objectification.

Women are more likely to suffer sadness brought on from feeling less than human; worthless despite any talent or intellect they have to offer. If their bodies do not match the standard, they must repetitively think of this and remind themselves of this in everything they do: the way they move, what they eat, etc., in order to try and get as close to this standard as they can, even if this means harming themselves (Bordo 18-20). The ideas of beauty and what women should be are so deeply ingrained into many women's psyches that arguably they have no choice but to prioritize it over their own health and well-being. At the very least, this can result into anxiety and shame, making it difficult for some women to be comfortable going out in public. At the very worst, it can make a woman completely socially withdrawn, or cause her to develop unhealthy eating habits or thought patterns that ultimately, as previously mentioned, result in depression or death.

Present-day/self proclaimed third wave feminist Jessica Valenti writes about combating this unattainable standard in her book "Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters." In the chapter "Get to It" where she offers advice for combating sexism, Valenti suggests that young girls do the following: "Value yourself for what the media doesn't—your intelligence, your street smarts, your ability to play a kick-ass game of pool, whatever. So long as it's not just valuing yourself for your ability to look hot in a bikini and be available to men, it's an improvement" (Valenti 246) as well as "Don't diet. Fuck them and their bullshit beauty standards. Eating can be a powerful act when the world wants you to disappear...Don't wear high heels, mascara, or whatever else they want. Fuck them and bullshit beauty standards" (Valenti 251). While simply

“fuck[ing] them and their bullshit beauty standards” sounds like an empowering approach, it is not a solution viable for women struggling with the standards she is speaking of. Valenti is not addressing the root of the issue, she is calling out the patriarchy for having “bullshit standards” but not calling for the system itself to change—instead, she is placing the burden on her audience of young women to change how they view themselves. This is nearly impossible, considering all of those she is addressing live in a world where patriarchal standards are imposed without fail—no matter how much a woman tells herself society’s standards of beauty are unrealistic and ridiculous, this does not stop her from being bombarded daily with images of the ideal woman; it does not necessarily keep her from being surrounded by people who expect her to look and act a certain way. No matter how hard she tries, and how good of esteem she can hold herself in a moment, there are always outward and inward images or ideas to drag her back down. The place where many Western women derive their confidence will not change until the societal standard of what women should be is destroyed.

Moreover, Valenti does not address the overwhelming power of patriarchal ideas over some women. As believed by many postmodern feminists, the patriarchal system has become so powerful that its control over many women extends beyond the external and becomes internal—manifesting itself into phenomenon such as habitual monitoring. Certainly a woman locked into thought patterns such as habitual body monitoring cannot make Valenti’s advice work for her. Recognition of the system is not enough—the system must change in order for many women to feel comfortable with themselves, for them to be comfortable being seen and occupying a physical form.

Visibility feminism recognizes the postmodern belief that the patriarchal system has the ability to affect women externally and also invade women internally. Visibility feminists believe in the ever-present shadow of patriarchy, as described by feminist Sandra Lee Bartky, "In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides with the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and judgment. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other" (Bartky 72). This is the root of the problem for visibility feminists: many women grow up with the overwhelming exterior presence of the patriarchy. Their inevitable saturation in patriarchal culture controls how they view themselves and provides them with a laundry list of things they must do to improve their appearance as well as a constant, eerie sense of being looked at, scrutinized, and measured up to one other.

This illusion of constant surveillance results in acute anxiety of being looked at, which often manifests itself into the behavior of habitual body monitoring, as well as internalized misogyny from comparing themselves to other women and how close others are to achieving the patriarchal standard. The new theory also acknowledges and immerses ideas of socialist feminist Alison Jaggar. Alienation from the self, mentioned previously, can be applied as an explanation for some women's mental disturbances within patriarchal culture. Many women can experience their bodies from a spectator view due to the fact they are expected to monitor and alter their bodies to reflect patriarchal expectations. From a young age this is learned through socialization, and while at a glance these body-altering behaviors seem optional, visibility feminists recognize they are unavoidable for many women.

Even if certain women want to renounce and call out the system for its ridiculousness and misogyny, they can only do so to a point and then anxiety fostered by self-policing drives them back under the control of the patriarchy. The anxiety is not the fault of the women. The root of the problem lies within ingrained beliefs instilled by the patriarchy, as well as the Western capitalist structure that reduces diversity of the body and reinforces objectification and Othering of women instead of providing them with full humanity. Visibility feminism, while believing that people's attitudes need to change for progress to be made, extends forgiveness to women who obsessively alter their bodies, and aims to educate women on exactly why they are participating in such debilitating behaviors. Women are not to blame for phenomena such as habitual body monitoring—societal powers of patriarchy, in collaboration with the white supremacist, capitalist media are to blame.

Therefore, to combat said ingrained beliefs, visibility feminists hold the patriarchal and capitalist system accountable. In order for women to truly be liberated, the patriarchal as well as capitalist system must be destroyed (Tong 112). However, because they exist together, intertwined and looming over the individual, visibility feminism understands complete demolition of these systems is not a realistic (at least for a short time) goal. To fight back, this type of feminism urges many women to not only recognize their power as a individual, but the power that lies within communities of women. Though this will prove difficult, the most threatening action a woman can demonstrate in front of the patriarchy is loud self-love and love for other women. A woman who is struggling with anxiety brought on by the societal structure must first search internally and determine and validate her feelings. She must recognize these feelings are not of her own making and assign blame

where it is due. Once a woman realizes that she is not the enemy, nor are her fellow women, she can begin to collaborate with other women to infiltrate patriarchal systems.

Visibility feminists must fight for all types of women to be visible—but not in the way patriarchy defines as the only acceptable way for them to show themselves. In order to better fight back against the harmful ideas socially instilled in many women, they must utilize community as mentioned above. While an individual has power to try and change thoughts about herself, as Valenti suggested, this is only a starting point, not a solution. A visibility feminist must take her self-talk to a more extreme level. Visibility feminism intends to draw from several ideas of radical cultural feminist Mary Daly in order to do this.

Daly's assessments of the patriarchy's internal hold on women matches with the beliefs of invisibility feminism. In her essay, *The Metapatriarchal Journey of Exorcism and Ecstasy*, she writes of the patriarchy:

“...Nor does this colonization exist ‘outside’ women’s minds, securely fastened into institutions we can physically leave behind. Rather, it is also internalized, festering inside women’s heads, even feminist heads...Objectification and alienation take place when we are locked into the male-centered, monodimensional foreground. Thus the monitors of the foreground, the male myth-masters, fashion prominent and eminently forgettable images of women in their art, literature, and mass media—images intended to mold women for male purposes” (Daly 271-272).

These sections of Daly's writing sum up perfectly what visibility feminists believe is the reason for women's subordination and resulting misguided desire not to occupy a physical form. Women are not free to be what they are, nor have peace of mind in the male gaze, but

rather they must be what the male gaze commands them to be. In order to revolt against this mind control, women must do more than band together.

To do so, visibility feminism embraces Daly's principle of the transvaluation of values. According to author of *Feminist Thought*, Rosemarie Tong, Daly "claimed that with respect to women, she whom the patriarch calls evil is in fact good, whereas she whom the patriarch calls good is in fact bad" (Tong 62). Daly offered this concept to fundamentally fight against patriarchal ideals, most notably, that a woman's appearance is a representation of her worth. With this system, Daly examines how terminology is used as a weapon by patriarchal systems to make a woman feel worthless and thus keep her from standing equal with man. While Daly takes this as doing the exact opposite of the patriarchy's demands, visibility feminism urges women to present their true selves without alteration. Thus, a visibility feminist must notice what is deemed societally beautiful, turn and reject that ideal, replacing it with her true self. Visibility feminism recognizes the radical cultural idea of the "false feminine" that is handed to certain women as rulebook dictating how they are allowed to look and conduct themselves. Daly calls this the "painted bird"—women with femininity are not their true selves but obedient to patriarchal values (Tong 61). This type of feminism recognizes the harmful affects of the false feminine and believes that many women think they are empowered by this rulebook because of self-policing. Many women are only embracing the false feminine as a way to ease anxiety and temporarily feel as if they are allowed to occupy a physical body.

Applying Daly's ideas of transvaluation and the "painted bird" of femininity that withholds the "true feminine," visibility feminists aim to embrace their natural selves. The standards of beauty must be far deviated from so that these feminist can practice self love

and love of other women. For example, women are to be loved regardless their weight: visibility feminists must acknowledge that one standard of beauty and lovability is always unhealthy, whereas extra body fat is not necessarily unhealthy. Women should not shame another women's weight, for if they do, that is participation in reinforcing the patriarchal standard that hurts many women and causes them to hate their physical form. Using the communal aspect of this feminism, women should raise their combined voices to especially praise images of women that do not fit the patriarchal norm. Overweight women can wear what is normally deemed unflattering and their fellow women must celebrate this, to the point of flaunting this in front of the male gaze. Any natural state or aspect of woman (the body without modification promoted both by the patriarchy and capitalism) must be thrown repeatedly into the male gaze until all he sees are images of "undesirable" women. Confident unshaven women, confident overweight women, women loving other women in any way they wish. This can also be key to battling anxiety: visibility feminists must be desirable to one another, sexually or platonically, encouraging each other to be in their bodies without alteration, claiming space for each other, educating one another on the irrationality of the patriarchal standard and standing for each other's right to be physically how they are.

This being said, challenges threaten the front of visibility feminism. The beliefs of this type of feminism in practice require a great deal of mobilization from communities of women, as well as a great deal of solidarity and acceptance. Patriarchal systems have taught many women that they last thing they should do is trust and support other women. As postmodern feminist Simone De Beauvoir states in "The Second Sex," because women are the Other (the object) and men are the Self (the subject), many women end up othering

themselves to the point where they cannot see themselves as anything but an object, incapable of fending for itself. "...women lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and they have no such solidarity of work and interest..." (De Beauvoir 151). Though many women may be united in the common anxiety of being seen through the male gaze and the consequences this ever-present thought produces, they first must come forth and admit their internal struggles to one another. Reassurance that they are not alone in their mental strife, that their unaltered physical form is enough to exist and be seen is absolutely crucial to the interest of visibility feminism.

This type of feminism must also call out to men especially to curb their thinking into different directions as well. Visibility feminism places blame on the patriarchal and capitalist systems, both of which heavily rely on women as well as men to sustain them. Boys and men must identify and be critical of how their opinions of women are shaped, how they value women, and what they do to participate in the objectification of women. For all people, Caroline Heldman suggests: "...you can boycott. You can simply refuse to consume materials that sexually objectify girls and women. You can contact media producers when something is offensive to you. You can produce your own media. Get behind the camera, write, act, direct. You can also engage in new media activism" (Heldman). Since women's self-objectification is a symptom of the system, all people must work together against the medial and societal commodification of women. All must undo burdens of an objectifying society. Habitual body monitoring is not a "woman's problem" alone. Men and others can join in the communal celebration of all bodies, as well as readjusting where a woman's value is placed. Visibility feminists extend and encourage

men and boys to participate in their goals to celebrate any bodies that make the patriarchal system uncomfortable. It calls on men and boys alike to watch carefully the images they consume and question what they have been taught to value. Perhaps one of the best things men and boys can do is call each other and the media out for objectifying women and use their privilege as a man as well as a consumer to demand fully human depictions of women. This may also prove to be challenging, however, considering the uniting and motivating factor between visibility feminists is their internal anxiety concerning being perceived, and many men may have no idea what it is like to suffer from this type of mental strain.

People of any kind must also practice conscious and perhaps painfully meticulous rejection of ingrained standards. The patriarchy has already programmed many women to act and present themselves in very specific manners, and unlearning these behaviors will not prove easy, especially since women practice these to reduce anxiety and insecurity. Visibility feminists will not villainize other women for their obedience to the culture they were raised in, recognizing it as means to survive and reduce mental anguish inflicted upon them. This theory of feminism acknowledges that many women will not be able to just “call bullshit” as Valenti suggests, and that education on concepts such as the false feminine are key to start the unlearning of patriarchal thoughts. However, visibility feminists also recognize that not every woman will have the same thoughts, same mental anguish nor access to education—this is considered a large roadblock in the movement, which calls for all women of many intersecting oppressions to contribute and collaborate within the movement in order to relieve as many women as possibly from all different sorts of mental anguish that a patriarchal society may inflict. More women must speak out—vocalizing their anxieties and then searching for causes, for solutions. Loving the body is an uphill

battle in a system which calls on women to despise themselves, but it must not be forgotten that women and people who love themselves as they are also have the power to become a system, with power the power of visibility.

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