On the 'Female Gaze' in the Interview Setting: Methodological Insights From Fieldwork With Women

Chiara Piazzesi[a]

Abstract

Building on a constructivist understanding of the interview techniques common to the social sciences, in this paper I discuss and analyse through a feminist sociological lens the interview setting that I built and experienced during two years of fieldwork with a small sample of Canadian women. Relevant conversational gestures exchanged in such a setting usually encompass verbal and bodily cues, but what principally concerns me here is a further aspect of the interview setting: namely, its visuality, and the related act of gazing carried out by the (female) participants. Using the concept of the 'female gaze' (Riley et al., 2016) – *i.e.*, the self-assessing, judgemental gaze that women direct at one another and at themselves in postfeminist contexts – I offer salient examples from my fieldwork in order to show the ways in which the female gaze shaped my understanding of how women look at themselves and at each other (including at me, as interviewer), both in person and in pictures. My goal is to analyse gazing as a competence, and more specifically as a structured and regulated female competence in postfeminist culture, but also to bring a greater reflexivity to bear on the embodied experience of fieldwork (Oakley, 1981; Pillow, 1997). As I came to learn in the course of this project, the act of gazing while conversing, accompanied by the corresponding verbal cues, played a crucial, if unexpected and unplanned, role in data production and in my subsequent choice of research questions.

Keywords: female gaze, interview, methods.

> *The unending dialectic between the role of member (participant) and stranger (observer and reporter) is essential to the very concept of field work.*
> – Everett Hughes, *The Sociological Eye*

[a] Université du Québec à Montréal, Montréal (QC), Canada.

1. Introduction

In his 1956 essay on the place and role of interviews in sociology, Everett Hughes (1971) offers a crucial observation on the nature of the sociological interview setting. Hughes highlights the considerable overlap between the ostensibly specialised skills of the professional interviewer and the more general, commonsensical, everyday social acuity that any competent social agent must practise when engaging in what we call 'conversation'. According to Hughes, the very possibility of an interview setting, in which information flows from interviewee to interviewer, and both parties uphold the back-and-forth of questions, cues, answers, and validations, hinges on a common mastery of the everyday communicational exchange that he defines, almost certainly thinking of George Herbert Mead's famous expression, as the 'conversation of verbal and other gestures' (Hughes, 1971: 508). For Hughes, then, 'the interview, as a form of social rhetoric, is not merely a tool of sociology, but a part of its very subject matter' (1971: 508).

Following the lessons of anthropology, in the last two decades sociologists have indeed developed an epistemological comprehension of the interview setting as a social situation in which learning and knowing are understood as joint activities involving both members of the exchange as well as their subjectivities. In addition, such an extraordinary communicational setting allows for the exchange of knowledge inasmuch as it shares certain features and patterns with the ordinary settings that are assumed to constitute interactions in everyday social life. Often described as a 'constructivist' understanding of the interview setting, this view assumes that the quality and content of data stem from the simultaneous presence of two active subjectivities interacting beyond the 'roles' of interviewer and interviewee (Gubrium, Holstein, 2012). Feminist scholars' reflections on the interview setting have fostered a critical awareness of the role of normative standards of anonymity, instrumentality, and neutrality in conversational methods. I refer in particular to Oakley's seminal work on the gendered relational dimension involved when a woman, and especially a feminist woman, interviews other women (Oakley, 1981; Tang, 2002).

Consistent with this understanding of the interview as an exchange of subjectivities, and of the specificities of a gendered encounter between female subjectivities, in this paper I take stock of and analyse through a feminist lens the interview setting that I experienced during two years of fieldwork. I regard the interview as a social encounter with certain distinct, but not extraordinary, features, patterns, and boundaries, requiring shared social skills, and entailing an exchange of communicational gestures between two (or more) participants whose identities are situated within a network of inequalities and power relations. In what follows, I pay particular attention to what happens when

women meet and interact in the context of an interview. Relevant conversational gestures exchanged in such contexts usually encompass verbal and bodily cues, but I will discuss a further aspect of the interview setting: its visuality, and the act of gazing at each other that the (female) members carry out. These instances of gazing were a crucial aspect of my fieldwork, the main objective thereof being to understand how women look at themselves and at each other in person and in pictures, and how they assess their own physical appearances and those of other women. Hence, I will discuss how female interviewees and interviewer gazed at each other's bodies and at each interviewee's selfies during their respective conversations (each of which were carried out on a one-on-one basis, with a single interviewee at a time). My goal is to analyse gazing as a competence, and more specifically as a structured and regulated female competence in postfeminist culture. Further, I will show how the conversational gazing gestures, accompanied by the corresponding verbal cues, were a crucial yet unexpected and unplanned device of relevant data production on my research questions.

In addition to adopting a feminist and constructivist approach to research using the interview technique, my epistemological approach is informed by Wanda Pillow's plea for an embodied methodology (Pillow, 1997), in which the diverse embodiments of norms, discourses, and strategies of resistance employed by actors in the field are taken into account in data analysis. Hence, my hope is that this paper will help to add a layer of complexity to an embodied methodological approach in which the modes of gazing at bodies and their aesthetic features are taken into consideration in both fieldwork design and analytical strategies. If the visibility of human bodies in interactional situations is constitutive of the meanings and actions produced in those situation (Goodwin, 2002), the analysis of interview settings could – perhaps *should* – include a discussion of embodied intentions and exchanges – of how two or more bodies perceive and respond to each other.

I will begin by establishing some theoretical reference points vis-à-vis the concept of the 'female gaze' and its characteristics. After describing the fieldwork that I carried out, both in terms of techniques and the intended setting, I will present the different instances of the female gaze that I was able to observe and experience.

2. The 'female gaze' as acquired ability to assess female bodies

If the sociological relevance of the gaze in social interactions was already apparent to Simmel (1908), Goffman (1963) was probably the first to analyse the norms and practices of gazing in both focused and unfocused interactions

in public places. According to Goffman, the act as well as its duration are highly regulated in public encounters: while the gaze expresses attention and involvement in common activities within focused encounters, gaze aversion serves the purpose of 'civil inattention' (1963, p. 84), a pivotal component of the work social actors perform to protect the integrity of their encounters. Following Goffman's insights, scholars in the fields of pragmatics and conversation analysis have studied the role of gaze direction in various social encounters, as it facilitates behavioural regulation and frame attunement between conversational partners (Goodwin, 1981, 2002; Kendon, 1990). More recent studies have analysed the dynamics of gaze direction and aversion in a host of different contexts, including the undertaking of specific tasks (Phelps, 2005) and the presence of mental health issues (Weeks et al., 2013), and in settings such as public debates (Ekström, 2012), medical consultations (Robinson, 1998), and job interviews (Acarturk et al., 2021).

Gazing, however, is not just a social, conversational gesture: within Western scientific culture, the gaze is also understood as an acquired tool that allows us to assess, qualify, and diagnose – especially with regards to human bodies. Beginning with Lavater's 'physiognomic' turn during the late eighteenth century (Lavater, 1775), nineteenth-century practitioners of medical science and psychology came to rely heavily on gazing in order to infer the qualities and features of individual bodies and moral subjects from their appearance. In this way was established a complex visual semantics, one that allowed for the construction of new subjectivities, such as in the case of hysteria (Didi-Huberman, 2003), the 'born' criminal (Lombroso, 2006), or the 'Black body' (Strings, 2019). At the same time, there emerged a specific mode of gazing that Wegenstein (2012) defines as 'cosmetic': here vision is privileged as a diagnostic tool to visually assess individuals with the aim of improving, transforming, of producing 'better' moral subjects by intervening on their bodily appearance – and thus, on their *selves*. Suffused with historically situated cultural norms, the 'cosmetic gaze' lies at the core of Western postfeminist beauty culture, which aims at regulating female subjectivities whose aspirations to a normative version of self-improvement are detectable by gazing at the surface of their bodies (Gill, 2007; Wegenstein, 2012). In this sense, as Elizabeth Heyne and Tanja Prokic (2022) remind us, the gaze is a social, economic, epistemic, and affective structure that is not limited to the physiology of the act of 'seeing' through a human eye.

It is indeed crucial to take into account the gendered character of gazing – both the practice itself and the norms that attach to it – within social encounters. Since at least Laura Mulvey's famous paper on the 'male gaze' and its function as an aesthetic and narrative organizing device in filmic productions (Mulvey, 1975), the term 'female gaze' has been used to allude to the rather important

inclusion of women's ways of seeing within both contemporary and ancient visual and literary cultural productions (Brey, 2020; Cozzolino, 2012; Lovatt, 2013; Waring, 1988). Psychology scholars Sarah Riley, Adrienne Evans, and Alison Mackiewicz, however, use the concept of the 'female gaze' in a more specific sense – namely, to indicate the centrality of women's looking practices in the constitution of a postfeminist subjectivity (Riley et al., 2016). The self-regulation required to aptly perform a gendered identity is not only predicated on the 'male gaze', or the hegemonic, objectifying masculine perspective that dominates in media production and becomes integrated into the way women perceive and visually shape themselves. Rather, according to Rosalind Gill (2007), in the contemporary postfeminist sensibility we can observe a discursive trend emphasizing women's ability to become subjects through individual choice and mutual empowerment. Once oriented by feminist movements towards social change and political contestation, the ideas of individual choice and mutual empowerment achieve a sort of vernacular status in postfeminist culture: both are depoliticised and progressively turned into forms of self-surveillance hinged mainly, even if not exclusively, on appearance and aesthetic self-entrepreneurship (Riley et al., 2019). At the heart of this self-surveillance lies a broader dispositive: the *female gaze*. Indeed, women's habit of looking at one another, and of seeing themselves through other women's eyes, plays a crucial role in reinforcing the rules and standards of self-regulation within a postfeminist normative framework. Notwithstanding the emphasis on *girl power*, sorority, mutual validation, or supportive female intimacy, this type of looking is only superficially benign. According to the women interviewed by Riley, Evans, and Mackiewicz, 'looking between women' is essentially 'judgmental, comparative, and pervasive' (2016, p. 108), more so than the desiring and objectifying male gaze. We can therefore argue that the 'female gaze' participates in structuring the reasonings and emotions of women who seek to become female subjects through aesthetic self-assessment and beautification: the modes, times, and investments of individual commitment are shaped by looking at other women, comparing oneself to them, listening to their advice, pondering their experiences, assessing their results.

The act of training oneself to critically look at one's body, to emphasise its assets and minimise its flaws, has been central to pedagogies of privileged, aristocratic femininity across the centuries (Perrot, 1984; Strings, 2019). With the increasing availability of full-size mirrors in private homes, the act of gazing at one's body gradually became a daily exercise of self-assessment for women across a wide range of demographic categories (Melchoir-Bonnet, 2002). In her study on what growing into a competent female subjectivity has meant for American girls over the last century and a half, Joan J. Brumberg (1998)

highlights how bodily self-surveillance grew increasingly central to the 'project' of becoming a young woman. Prime contributors to this shift include technological advancements in lighting for bathrooms and bedrooms (where skin and complexion were examined), along with the increasing ubiquity of mirrors, but also photography and film: through magazines, advertisements, movies, commercials, and tv shows, girls could visually absorb the micro-injunctions of a pedagogy of feminine embodiment and organise their daily rituals of self-scrutiny accordingly (Brumberg, 1998). Since the inception of the beauty industry and its rhetoric of self-improvement and self-care, the self-directed female gaze has come to constitute itself above all as a *cosmetic gaze*.

Today, women's ways of seeing and assessing their and other female bodies are increasingly mediated by the panoply of images representing women and teaching viewers to differentiate beautiful, sexy, and worthy bodies from ugly, unworthy, and shameful ones. Azzarito (2010) highlights a similar connection between consumed images and competent ways of gazing at active bodies within sport activities: pictures circulating through media are 'a source of body knowledge', and hence act as a visual pedagogy instructing people on what constitutes a good body (156). The conspicuous overlap between aesthetic and moral qualifications is not accidental: in recent decades wellness practices have been increasingly framed in ethical terms (wellness and healthy habits are *good*, unhealthy ones are *bad*, and so forth [Conrad, 1994)]). Consistent with this understanding of the cosmetic gaze as a normative device, appearance becomes the measure of a subject's ethical worth and of their ability to abide by certain virtuous choices (Riley et al., 2019).

The female gaze plays a crucial part in women's sociability. As media scholar Alison Winch has shown, in contemporary postfeminist discourse the pervasiveness of women's mutual aesthetic surveillance is intertwined with the emphasis on female friendship and intimacy. Looking at, and scrutinizing, one another's appearance seems to be so central a part of networks of female friendship that Winch proposes the metaphor of the 'gynaeopticon' to describe them (Winch, 2015). The term is of course inspired by Michel Foucault's discussion of Jeremy Bentham's famous 'panopticon', a notional prison in which inmates would be subjected to uninterrupted, centralised surveillance (Foucault, 1977). The idea of such a device, according to Foucault, symbolically marks the emergence of a disciplinary society, in which control, having once been largely exterior and punitive, is displaced within the subject itself; from here it becomes embodied and takes the form of self-surveillance. For Winch, the 'gynaeopticon' represents the omnipresence, pervasiveness, and disciplinary effect of the female gaze rooted in networks of intimacy and friendship: women are always visible to other women, and their appearance is the main locus of the disciplinary gazes that they are socialised to exchange.

To dramatise this increased exposure, portable, connected, camera-equipped devices allow us to become visible to ourselves whenever we feel the need to check on our appearance or record a memory of it. The selfie thus contributes to the modes and techniques of self-surveillance and self-assessment in postfeminist cultural contexts.

3. The fieldwork: talking and gazing

My fieldwork was conducted with a small convenience sample (Crouch, McKenzie, 2006) of eleven women aged twenty-two to fifty-two, living in Montreal, professionally active and/or completing post-secondary degrees, and actively posting selfies to their Instagram and Facebook accounts[1]. First, I studied each participant's Facebook and Instagram accounts to analyse the ten most recent selfies they shared as well as their associated hashtags, and more generally to take note of posts or accounts liked or followed by each participant; I was especially interested in things like women's magazines, celebrities, companies, and products related to self-care and beauty. I discussed my observations with each participant during an initial round of semi-directed individual interviews between January and May 2018. Participants were questioned about their pictures, their selfie-related habits, practices, and reflections, their understanding of the norms and tacit rules that govern each social networking platform, but also about their relationship with their appearance, with gender stereotypes around beauty and femininity, and with beautification practices. All the interviews took place in public spaces, notably in cafés located in downtown Montreal, where conversations could flow undisturbed while also remaining embedded in a laid-back, urban, every-day vibe which is typical of our city.

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[1] The sample was homogeneous in terms of ethnicity (10 out of 11 women were white) and sexual orientation (all the participant were heterosexual), but not in socio-economic terms (6 out of 11 participants fell in the low-income bracket according to the 2020 report on economic inequalities in Québec [Centre d'étude sur la pauvreté et l'exclusion 2020]). For more information on the profile of each participant, see Piazzesi 2023, *Appendix A*. Ethics clearance for this research was issued by the Ethics Committee of the Faculté des sciences humaines at the Université du Québec à Montréal (certification #1978_e_2017). I am grateful to Catherine Lavoie Mongrain, who worked as a research assistant on the project (2017–2019). My gratitude also goes to Ryan Perks for his help with editing and revisions.

After this first round of interviews, I asked each participant to take seven selfies connected to five pre-determined situations (a first date, a job interview, a presentation at work or school, a night out with girlfriends, and a 'bathroom' selfie) and two situations chosen by the participant. The idea was to ascertain and document each participant's visual language, specifically as they related to different formal, informal, and private contexts. I chose this visual data-collection technique, called photo-elicitation (Rose, 2016), for three reasons. First, participants' pictures helped to facilitate conversations and trigger memories during the interviews (Wills et al., 2016). Second, they enabled both the participants and the researcher to exemplify the reflections, techniques, and behaviours described in each interview (either with regards to the interviewees themselves or to other women in their circles). And third, they provided me with additional insights into the patterns of behaviour, visual choices, and personal experiences discussed with the participants or inferred from further data – and this from the point of view of the participants themselves (Bolton et al., 2001). During the second round of interviews (September to December 2018), I printed out all the selfies sent by each participant in colour on a 22-by-28-centimetre piece of paper. The printed pictures – considerably larger than those viewed on a mobile phone screen, and hence magnifying details that would hardly be noticeable in a smaller format – were placed on the table in front of each participant at the beginning of their interview. I would begin by questioning my interlocutor about two or three of their selfies, pre-selected for their particular salience, but I would also invite them to browse their phones, social media accounts, and printed pictures, and to pick other relevant images for discussion[2].

In keeping with the description offered by Oakley (1981), the length and complexities of a longitudinal project demanded that I establish a friendly relationship with participants from the start: being frank, transparent, and forthcoming was key to motivating them not to discontinue their participation in the project. It was my hope that kindness, enthusiasm, and a willingness on my part to answer participants' questions would be returned. I chose to conduct the very first exchange with each woman via phone call (instead of e-mail or messaging) in order to initiate further conversation and to 'pitch' my research project in a more personal way, and the potential participants whom I contacted manifested a genuine interest in the topic of my research. As Oakley states, interviewees are always invested with the power of sabotaging the research

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[2] Each of the interviews were transcribed in their entirety and coded for emerging themes through open and iterative codification (Gioia et al., 2013). All data were archived and processed with QSR International's NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software.

design and the information flow (1981, p. 56). Hence, I tried to give participants little or no reason to be annoyed with me: my reminders were always friendly, I fully accommodated their schedules, and I would repeatedly and unreservedly express my deep gratitude after each interaction, whether in person, through Facebook instant messages, or by e-mail. My motives were certainly self-interested and my behaviour strategic, but I strove to ensure that this was absolutely clear to the participants from the start, as they agreed to give their time and energy to a research endeavour that ultimately belonged to me. Interviews were held in cafés in different Montreal neighbourhoods, and they often assumed the pace and allure of a conversation between acquaintances rather than between strangers. I did my best to make each participant feel comfortable, but this didn't mean ignoring or minimizing the differences between us. Aware of the power dynamics that inevitably inform the interview setting (Tang, 2002), my efforts were also directed towards downplaying hierarchical differences between the participants and myself, especially in terms of educational levels. Achieving a more fruitful balance of social status was facilitated by my being (a) a foreigner: I officially immigrated to Canada in 2013, a fact I explicitly brought up during the interviews in order to make clear that I am prone to miss some of the subtleties of North American cultures; (b) an allophone: Italian being my mother tongue, both French and English are acquired languages for me, which meant that I could ask seemingly naive questions about the various terms and expressions used by the participants without appearing disingenuous or otherwise suspicious; (c) a petite woman: with one exception, all participants were taller than me; (d) a woman with a rather plain look: short hair, almost no make-up, simple attire; and (e) a person with almost no experience with selfie-taking or the maintenance of a social media profile. Showing up with a relatively plain look was for me also an attempt to signify to participants that *they* were the experts in matters of beautification and selfie-production, and that I had everything to learn. Hence, when possible, I compensated for certain differences (for instance, in terms of socio-economic and educational levels) by highlighting others (immigration status, level of experience, etc.). Above all, however, I felt that since these exchanges were taking place 'between women', this created for both interviewer and interviewee the impression of common ground, of a shared language based on our similar experiences of the world and its obstacles. Partly willfully, partly unconsciously, my conversational strategy oscillated between acknowledging that this quality of being 'between women' created an immediate understanding, and demonstrating a relative ignorance of the logics, techniques, and gestures of 'doing' beauty and 'doing' selfies. It is in the space between these two modes – between my being an ally and my being an outsider – that the gaze came to

play a crucial part, as participants looked at my appearance to find evidence of either role, and to react accordingly.

The main point is, the two interviews with each participant involved talking, gazing, and an intermingling of the two, and these communications were partly facilitated by my discursive and aesthetic self-positioning within the interview setting.

4. Instances of the female gaze

4.1. Gazing at ane's selfies

The first, and perhaps the most predictable, instance of the female gaze during the interviews was apparent in the way interviewees looked at their own pictures and discussed with me what they saw. Confronted with their selfies, they would situate the pictures in the appropriate context by evoking memories, situational details, and existential circumstances so as to account for some of the visual elements in each of them. This included not just objects and places, but also – perhaps mostly – features of the subject's appearance in their selfies. For instance, Juliette[3] (thirty-five years old) provided a thorough accounting of the way her hair looked in a certain picture, of the reasons why it had looked better elsewhere (for instance, the availability of more disposable income, or access to her favourite hairdresser), and of the reasons why her hairstyle in a certain picture made her look less 'alive' ('like a doll', and hence fake). She said that finding a fitting hairstyle is her ongoing obsession, a quest in which she invests money, time, and mental space. While explaining these facts and providing me with cues on how to appraise the different versions of herself, she also instructed me on how her current bodily appearance had failed to correspond to the way she 'really' is: having always been thin, she was unwilling to accept that the bigger shape portrayed in her selfies reflected 'her' self. Juliette explicitly qualified her inability to lose this extra weight (which had resulted mainly from an injury and subsequent changes in her lifestyle) as a personal failure; hence, while telling me that she could be more beautiful than she was at the time of our conversations, she was also telling me that she could be *morally* better. As Wegenstein (2012) would put it, Juliette's gaze is decidedly a 'cosmetic gaze'.

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[3] In order to ensure the participants' anonymity, I've used pseudonyms throughout. Some of the interviews having taken place in French, the English translations are my own.

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While gazing at a selfie in which she wears full make-up – thus something of an anomaly in her collection of plainer selfies – Eva (twenty-eight) recalled that such a look was produced to comply with her family's expectation regarding the proper self-presentation for an important celebration, and that it goes against her own taste and her own idea of beauty. 'I would love for my family to know me as more… normal, like I am in my everyday life, without all the frills', she added. While she found the picture beautiful, and posted it on Instagram, she nonetheless felt the need to enlighten me as to the visual dissonance between the woman pictured there and her otherwise normal appearance – not only in other pictures, but at the time of the interview as well. As someone with a background in social sciences and some familiarity with feminist ideas, Eva attributed her compliance with a more mainstream version of feminine beauty to social expectations and pressure from her family; it was as though she didn't want me to assume that it had been her idea. However, gazing at the picture gave her a certain pleasure, and she wanted me to know that too.

A similar ambiguity emerged from my interview with Audrey (forty years old). She is very vocal about her struggles with bodily self-acceptance and presents herself as an 'intersectional feminist', and in our second interview she picked as a 'favourite selfie' a glamorous picture in which she wears a full face of make-up. As with Eva's preferred selfie, this meant that Audrey's chosen image presented a stark contrast with the plainer look she tended to display in other selfies and during our conversations. She explained that she applied a Snapchat filter to achieve that glamorous appearance: 'Well, Snapchat does the make-up for you, which is really nice, so, I don't know I … it's the way I wish I'd look all the time'. The picture, which she printed out and framed for herself, corresponded neither to her usual look nor to the self-declared incompetence that she claimed characterises her approach to cosmetic matters. Since Audrey is unable to reproduce such an elaborate look in real life, she encouraged me to gaze upon the selfie as her idealised self and appreciate its conformity with mainstream beauty standards, while also clarifying that her ordinary self-presentation really *is* ordinary, unglamorous, and more consistent with her feminist stance.

As a conversation starter during our first interview, I picked a picture that Fanny (thirty-five) had posted on Instagram and captioned a 'smouldering selfie'. In colloquial English, 'smoulder' refers to the type of sexy stare that expresses one's sexual energy and desire. Fanny, too, wears an elaborate face of make-up in this picture, but like Audrey, she pointed out that this did not reflect the way she presents herself most days. She was getting ready to go out with girlfriends, 'so we were putting on, like, tons of make-up. My friend put fake lashes on me'. I understand that Fanny took the selfie out of a sense of

playfulness, in a moment of positive female sociability with her friend, and that the sexy stare was part of their goofing around before going out together. She related that it was challenging to find the right time to put it out there: when she wanted to post it, 'I thought that this was kind of random, like I was thinking in my head that this was – I don't know what it was, like, Tuesday morning, and I'm posting this made-up selfie of myself that I'm not currently actually looking like'. The dissonance between the picture and the *real thing*, which she could narratively justify during the interview in order to moderate my judgemental gaze, would have been impossible to satisfactorily explain to her social media followers or real-life friends and acquaintances had she posted a similar look at a less opportune time, thereby highlighting the incongruity between appearance and occasion.

As these examples show, the participants' judgemental gazes, sustained by the corresponding explanatory efforts, were anticipating my own: the interviewees felt the need to account for the aesthetic inconsistency between how they appeared in their pictures and their looks in the interview setting – in my presence, with me gazing at them and their selfies. We discussed selfies that materialised their ability to conform to dominant standards of feminine beauty – a fact of which they were manifestly proud – but they also sought to account for the dissonance between these selfies and their actual looks, and in some cases even their beliefs. In my view, this need to explain and justify was grounded in the interviewees' assumption that my (female) gaze was likely to be as uncharitable as the gaze that they would direct at their own or other women's selfies. Hence, they applied to their pictures and to their 'selves' a level of critical scrutiny that they would consider acceptable coming from another woman – and one with a "scientific" purpose to boot.

4.2. Gazing at other people's selfies

Melissa (fifty years old) does not appreciate social media users who continuously share selfies for no apparent reason. She finds it reprehensible, unnecessary, unwarranted. When we gazed together at her selfies, she connected each one to a specific moment in time: an activity, a special occasion, a noteworthy reason to share an image with her followers. And she explained that she needs her appearance to be more than merely presentable for a selfie to happen; it would be wrong, she said, to offer up one's worst days to other people's gaze. To Melissa, people who post selfies everyday might seek 'validation':

> There's one woman I know, I don't know her personally very well, she's less than an acquaintance, she's a Facebook friend. […] Not only does she post very often but she also alters her photographs in Snapchat so her face is not her face, it's just Barbie. […] It's almost scary, she never looks like herself, and you know it's plastic 'cause the eyes… It's an artificial image of her, and she's a very beautiful woman and you think, 'My God, why do you do that to yourself all the time?' I look at that picture and I think, 'Why does she have to do that all the time?'

What I gather from Melissa's statement is that a need for validation must be carefully balanced against the risk of losing one's authenticity, of losing oneself. Melissa gazes upon her Facebook acquaintance's pictures and sees a woman whose psychological needs lead her to excess – excessive posting, excessive use of filters, and an excessive level of self-exposure. Such loss of balance, and its materialization in selfies, was vehemently reprehended by other participants too. Eva, for instance, explained how she restrains herself from taking selfies 'in public' because she considers it 'inappropriate' when other people interrupt the flow of social interactions to take a selfie, or just direct the camera at themselves when they are surrounded by others. Eva insisted that the act of turning the camera on oneself in public is in itself unbecoming, which I interpret as an echo of the collective condemnation of selfie-takers' alleged excessive desire to be at the centre of attention. As far as Cassandra (fifty) is concerned, young women are uncertain about who they are, which makes them embrace certain representational 'extremes', such as 'showing too much of everything at all times, or not showing themselves at all and keeping covered' – as in covered by make-up, fake lashes, and so on.

'Excess' still appears to be women's cardinal sin in Western societies, a sin that must be collectively chastised and individually avoided. Partially echoing Beverly Skeggs's observation regarding the construction of 'respectable' femininity (Skeggs, 1997), sociologists Kate Cairns and Josée Johnston use the term 'calibration' to describe women's efforts to adopt a set of consumer behaviours with regards to food that will be deemed 'reasonable, informed, and moderate' by those around them. Calibration, they explain, refers not just to the effort to remain within some 'middle ground', but also to the careful nurturing of a competent postfeminist femininity that eschews the 'feminized pathologies' that are 'characterized by irrationality and loss of control' (Cairns, Johnston, 2015, p. 32)[4]. When I asked Zoe (fifty years old) if she felt that a negative stigma targets women's selfies on social media, she said that this is definitely the case:

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[4] For a discussion of the construction of proper femininity online, see also Dobson, 2015.

she reported routinely seeing younger women taking and posting sexier selfies, and being proud of their beautiful appearance, as the object of violent attacks from other social media users. The bottom line of these reprimands, Zoe said, is to reprimand women: 'Who do you think you are?' In other words, to remind them of their place – a place of balance, of respectability, of relative modesty, and of *visible* distance from excess. According to Zoe, women are perfectly aware of this stigma, and they fear its effects especially when gazed upon (in real life or online) by other women. Clarisse (thirty-five) reported having heard quite often the claim that 'women who do selfies, they're crazy, they have psychological problems'. As a consequence, she explained that she consciously avoids behaviours that would leave her vulnerable to such an accusation.

As in the case of gazing at one's own selfies, this second instance of the female gaze is entirely consistent with the surveillance and gatekeeping practices described by Riley, Evans, and Mackiewicz (2016). Not only do women monitor their own behaviour as it materialises in appearance, self-presentation, and self-exposure, but they also contribute to the collective surveillance of other women's selves and self-expression, in order to situate themselves on the side of balance, moderation, and reason – even when they criticise the unjustified character of the stigma targeting them and other women.

4.3. Gazing at the interviewer's body

I was able, finally, to retrospectively single out a third instance of the female gaze in the interview setting built for my fieldwork. In addition to being 'the researcher' and/or 'the interviewer', I discovered that in the interviewees' eyes I was also – like them – an embodied female subject. Instead of keeping my body, my relationship to beauty, and my appearance out of our exchanges, participants repeatedly shifted the terms of our conversations so as to render these factors up for discussion. Interviewees commented on my hair, my skin, any signs of aging or lack thereof, my make-up or lack thereof, my choice of clothing styles, my body size, and my apparent level of fitness. They treated me, in other words, as a fellow woman who puts some thought and effort into her appearance, and who can therefore competently talk about these matters with other women.

During our second interview, while we were talking about her willingness to gradually relinquish artifice, and especially make-up, now that she has crossed the threshold of her fifties, Cassandra suddenly asked me, 'Are you wearing make-up? You're not, right?' I replied that I was not (on that day at least). Cassandra then reassured me that I looked 'perfect', with a 'very nice, soft look', before asking again, suggesting that I might be wearing a subtle layer of

foundation or tinted moisturiser: 'You've got that look of just wearing it, and that's just a light thing, right?' I answered again that I did not put anything on that morning. Cassandra then declared,

> I think it's better, I think it's better. I just look at women who are caked on and I'm like, why do we do that? And it's doing us no service at all. But I don't want to say get rid of it completely. I don't want to say there's not a time for eyelashes. Just not all day, every day.

In a couple of short sentences, Cassandra provided me with a series of important instructions on how to successfully participate in beautification, how to wisely use artifice, how to age gracefully, how to avoid excess – in a word, how to be a woman of my age (note her use of the inclusive 'us'). While talking to me about more formal subjects related to my fieldwork, she managed to turn the female gaze on me and make my appearance – and my competence as a woman – the main topic of conversation for a couple of minutes. She established a friendly complicity by creating a commonality of interests (a 'we'), and at the same time she positioned herself as a more mature, more experienced woman who could share her authoritative insights on how to preserve one's dignity while aging and participating in beauty culture.

Another interviewee in her fifties, Melissa, spoke profusely about the amount of care, time, and effort required to maintain her long hair; she joked about having heard all her life her mother telling her to brush her hair, and her failure to comply often enough. Without thinking about the effect of my reply, I heard myself commenting, 'that's why I have – ', whereupon Melissa promptly completed my sentence: ' – a pixie cut!' I explained my inability to do anything with my hair aside from blow-drying it when it's too cold out (the reader will certainly have heard of the harshness of Canadians winters). Trying to balance her strong feelings with the need to remain polite, Melissa replied,

> It suits you! I wouldn't… like having a short haircut; for me it's like, I had that when I was a kid. But it's also what I identify with, to me, yes… you want to know a secret? Absolutely, if I had no hair or short hair, I don't know what I would do because it's such a part of me, it's always been a part of me to have bigger hair or that sort of statement thing. My look has been my hair.

Melissa explained that her big, long hair has always defined her 'beauty identity'. By strongly connecting her dislike of short hair with her sense of self, Melissa attempted to mitigate the negative emotions that she anticipated I might feel on account of her remarks. She was in fact telling me, in not so many words, that she has no interest in emulating my appearance, but she did so by way of a

rhetorical turn that is very often used to take the edge off any negative aesthetic judgement between women: it is/it can be beautiful, it's just not for me.

During several conversations, especially those involving women of my age group (I was just above forty at the time of the interviews), I also perceived that the participants were silently judging my appearance, if only superficially. I felt the power of the female gaze even when my interlocutors did not mention my looks. Even more fascinating, as far as I was concerned, was the fact that this gaze had a tangible impact on my self-perception, notwithstanding my efforts to keep my own aesthetic concerns as an embodied female subject out of the research setting. These efforts, which in retrospect appear rather naive from a methodological perspective, backfired when I realised that being looked at, assessed, and given recommendations triggered in me a degree of self-questioning, curiosity, and a reconsideration of my level of commitment to beautification. After Fanny mentioned that she visits a beauty parlour specializing in eyebrows, I inspected mine at home for shape and cleanliness, and I resolved to visit an aesthetician more often to get them done. The same thing happened when she talked about softening hairsprays: a couple of days after the interview, I went to the pharmacy and acquired a bottle of my own. Looking at the selfies in which Eva sports a bold red lipstick, I fancied wearing a similar shade myself. When I finally did, I happened to cross paths with Juliette, and she complimented me profusely on my choice, her comments enhancing my sense of competence and pride. After Audrey and Melissa compared their hair with mine, I found myself wondering whether I should reconsider my decision to renounce long hair forever. When Cassandra complimented my skin, I felt proud, as if she was confirming that I belonged to the right team. After that conversation, I also came to see my complexion as possibly one of my assets, and so resolved to follow more consistently a daily three-step skin-care routine. This sense of validation, mixed with an awareness of the need for continuous work, was even stronger when Lena, who is a fitness lover, said that she considered me to be someone who is in good shape. Even in a research setting, and regardless of my theoretical knowledge of beauty norms and social surveillance of women's bodies, the female gaze altered my self-image, spurred in me a desire to adopt what I perceived as a more competent performance of femininity, and reshaped my material and affective involvement in beauty culture. The dynamics of the female gaze in the interview setting spurred in me an aspirational 'cosmetic gaze', clearly oriented towards aesthetic and moral self-improvement.

5. Concluding remarks: a counter-pedagogy of female gazing?

In the early 1970s, John Berger famously stated that the gendered social organization of the "ways of seeing" bestows upon women the role of self-watching objects to be seen and appraised by men: "*Men act* and *women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at*" (Berger, 1972, p. 47). In addition, according to Berger, female beauty is organized as a competition adjudicated by men. However, scholars recently highlighted the changing structure of gazing practices within contemporary post-feminist culture: if women are still strongly self-policing and perceive themselves as "object" of gazing gestures, they are at the same time active subjects of seeing practices (Gill, 2007) directed at other women (Winch, 2015) and, increasingly, at men. Women now watch themselves being watched by other women, and often expect men to subject themselves to women's appraising gazing acts. A discussion of whether this shift can be considered as a form of emancipation is beyond the scope of this paper[5].

In accordance with the observations from Everett Hughes that I quoted in the introduction, the general objective of this paper was to cast a feminist, sociological light on the interview setting in which I encountered the eleven Canadian women who participated in my fieldwork. I sought to analyse the way the shared skills, norms, and competences of the involved female subjectivities translated into bodily and discursive interactions during the interviews. More specifically, I looked at instances of the female gaze as a generalised, postfeminist female competence, and at its pivotal role in interview data production.

The continuity between social life and the interview setting triggered the dynamics of the female gaze, which in turn shaped my fieldwork and my data. The interviewees applied the same gaze to their own appearances, to their selfies, to other women's appearances and selfies, and to me. By doing this, they clearly manifested the 'cosmetic' orientation of the female gaze, intended to foster constant aesthetic and moral self-improvement. The social, interactional component of the interview setting, in which embodied female subjects were simultaneously present in space, allowed for the conversation and the gaze to move back and forth along a spectrum of feminine surveillance – from one's own body to other women's bodies – thus upholding and sharing a definition of proper, competent femininity in matters of aesthetics and morality. This continuous shifting between gazing and assessing allowed me, as a researcher,

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[5] A broader, more politically relevant discussion of beauty and gazing practices within post-feminist culture can be found in my book *The Beauty Paradox. Feminity in the Age of Selfies* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023).

to materially understand the female gaze not only as an abstract concept, but as a lived, embodied experience capable of influencing my fieldwork. The friendly setting that I worked to create enabled conversational and visual exchanges that mimicked women's real-life interactions in the areas of beauty and appearance, which are also shaped by the tone of subtle complicity found in print and online media offering beauty advice. As Winch (2015) has shown, the superficial amiability of the advice and compliments that women exchange in the context of beautification and appearance contributes to gatekeeping and the enforcement of surveillance; in other words, the 'gynaeopticon' has a friendly face.

The embodied subjects in my fieldwork (the participants as well as myself) were indeed sites of negotiation as regards the norms and discourses regulating femininity, and in particular its visible performance in individual looks and self-presentation. Each of us was at once exposed to the other person's female gaze and acting as a vector of the female gaze itself, thus upholding expectations and norms of femininity both through practices of gazing and judging and through the gesture of offering a feminine body to another woman's gaze and assessment. Hence, our conversations were shaped not only by questions and structured topics, but also by the encounter between embodied female subjects whose bodily experience, co-presence, gaze, and visibility would inform the negotiation of a definition of the situation and of the identity of the people involved. In this sense, it is my hope that this paper, in addition to analysing postfeminist culture, also helps to widen our reflexivity regarding the embodied experience of fieldwork, the ways qualitative methodological techniques affect both researcher and participants, and how this experience subsequently percolates through our analysis and theory writing (Klag, Langley, 2013).

Conformity and surveillance, however, were not the only modes of the female gaze that I encountered within the interview setting. I would like to conclude with some brief remarks on what I would call, paraphrasing Mardi Schmeichel, Stacey Kerr, and Chris Linder (2020), a 'counter-pedagogy' of the female gaze that participants attempted to enact during the interviews. As Schmeichel, Kerr, and Linder have argued, selfies shared on social media can contribute to a 'pedagogy' of proper femininity, thereby feeding into the surveillance dispositive that is the female gaze. At the same time, however, practices aimed at enhancing the visibility of bodies that do not conform to mainstream standards of beauty and femininity, such as those in accordance with the 'body positive' movement, are gradually spreading on social media, making such platforms into sites not only of surveillance and exclusion, but also of resistance and alternative self-definitions for women and marginalised groups. During the interviews, participants would enact a counter-pedagogy of the female gaze by reinforcing more diverse norms of femininity and beauty.

They did so in three main ways. Firstly, they took, posted online, and shared with me selfies that wittingly contravened the established norms of 'appropriate' selfie-taking and feminine appearance – an intention about which they were quite explicit, and which testifies to their awareness of the 'politics' that surround selfies and women's visibility. Secondly, during the interviews they often openly criticised the cult of (female) perfection that predominates on social media and the pernicious effects that it has on women's (and especially young women's) sense of self. Thirdly, in our conversations they often characterised their own visual practices, self-representational gestures, and engagements with other women's online content or their embodied presence in real life as deliberate attempts to promote a more diverse and inclusive beauty culture, one that might speak to all women, whether online or off. Obviously, these attempts needed to be balanced with the female gaze itself – its theoretical as well as its practical iterations – specifically with regard to the individual consequences of non-conformity and the voicing of political demands. They were nevertheless a core part of the participants' practical self-positioning in their personal networks, on social media, and in the offline public sphere.

To conclude, in a research project on selfies, beauty culture, and women's experiences related to appearance and beautification, I was able to gain unexpected insight into the dispositive that unites them all and constructs them as culturally framed: the dynamics of female gazing, which is constitutive of a competent performance of femininity premised on the ability to offer a proper feminine appearance to other people's (competent) gaze. Structured by norms of gendered performance, informed by patterns of approval and disapproval vis-à-vis embodied femininities, directed towards practices of cosmetic and moral self-improvement, but also shaped by feminist politics and practices of resistance, the female gaze enables gatekeeping, certainly, and yet it also abets occasional transgressions, non-conformity, and the visibility of bodily diversity (especially in online spaces). The female gaze as witnessed and experienced in the course of my fieldwork materialised the lived experience of what the women I interviewed described when talking about their participation in beauty culture: the embodied, felt exposure to one's own and to other people's judging gaze.

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