

Putting Men in the Male Gaze: The Hawkeye Initiative and visual argument

Jennifer McGee

Abstract

The Hawkeye Initiative is an Internet-based mimetic (easily copied and disseminated) project in which artists draw a specific male character--Hawkeye from Marvel Comics--in poses that copy art of female characters in comic books. The project's aim is to raise awareness of the distorting effects of the male gaze in visual art through humor and implicit, visual argument. By creating a context where large numbers of people can participate, the framers of the Hawkeye Initiative fostered a humorous but pointed discussion of the way female characters are portrayed in visual media. This paper examines the artwork of the Hawkeye Initiative, exploring the ways the artists use artwork to make an argument.

Introduction

The art is striking, arresting, eye-catching: a superhero in tight leather clothing, carefully posed in mid-leap in a strangely skewed position that gives the viewer a clear look at the character's chest and behind simultaneously. The character looks out of the page at the viewer flirtatiously. A common image on the cover of comic books in the United States, but what makes this example particularly unusual is that the character is a man, and the cover is a piece of parody art for an Internet-wide crowdsourced project called "The Hawkeye Initiative," designed to make people think about the lens of the male gaze and its distorting power on the way women are portrayed in popular culture.

This paper is a brief overview of the Hawkeye Initiative, exploring the ways in which the project used and popularized Laura Mulvey's term "the male gaze" from her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." I argue that the Hawkeye Initiative is a good example of a grassroots political meme in which the work of thousands of people, done largely from a sense of ironic fun rather than in serious earnest, accumulates to make a point that no one person could make alone.

The Male Gaze

Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," published in *Screen* magazine in 1975, is a key early work in feminist media theory. The essay was originally written with a strong grounding in Freudian theory, starting from the Freudian idea of "scopophilia as one of the component

instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones” (806). As Freudian analysis has become less common, the psychoanalytic concepts at the base of the essay have been downplayed over time. However, the heart of Mulvey’s work, exploring the ways in which female bodies are presented for male visual pleasure, has entered the mainstream of popular culture. The key term, “the male gaze” has become so well-known that one can see it used in relatively casual settings in an informal, adjectival form: for example, a Twitter post referring to a movie’s directorial style as “super male gaze-y” (McNutt 2014).

According to Mulvey, “the male gaze” is a shorthand term for the way women in visual media are

simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Women displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to striptease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. (809)

Mulvey’s essay carefully deconstructs several movies, with a special focus on Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, to give examples of the many times in which the female body is held up by directors as an object to be viewed--not just by the male protagonist, but by the (presumptively) male audience members:

The most important absence is that of the controlling male gaze within the screen scene. The high point of emotional drama in the most typical Dietrich films, her supreme moments of erotic meaning, take place in the absence of the man she loves in the fiction. . . . At the end of *Morocco*, Tom Brown has already disappeared into the desert when Amy Jolly kicks off her gold sandals and walks after him. At the end of *Dishonoured*, Kranau is indifferent to the fate of Magda. In both cases, the erotic impact, sanctified by death, is displayed as a spectacle for the audience. (812-813)

In this way, traditional cinema assumes the maleness (and heterosexuality) of the audience, and presents the female form for its consumption. The camera becomes a stand-in for the audience, gazing at women in a way meant to give the viewer a sense of privileged access and power. This tendency to contemplate the women in visual media as objects, Mulvey goes on to point out, does not always serve the narrative well: the eroticised image “tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (809). This tendency is

one we will see more of when we turn to the specific example of comic books, and this tendency is part of what is being deflated by the Hawkeye Initiative.

The Hawkeye Initiative

The Hawkeye Initiative was an outgrowth of various outlets designed to point out ways in which Western superhero comics tend to be tailored to the male gaze and thus simultaneously objectifying of female bodies and disconfirming of female readers. *Escher Girls*, for example, is a blog founded in December 2011 that posts scans of female characters caught in contorted, eroticised poses. In December 2012 it was joined by *The Brokeback Pose*, which serves a similar function. The titles of both blogs refer to a distinct look in comic books, in which a usually-female character is posed so that both her breasts and her buttocks are clearly displayed for the male reader. The result is a distorted anatomy in which the character's spine is curved or bent in ways that are difficult if not impossible to achieve in reality.

Both blogs got some extra publicity when one critiqued artist, Randy Queen, demanded that the *Escher Girls* blog take down posts of his art (Masnick 2014). When they did so, but mentioned on the blog that he was the only artist that had ever demanded such a thing, he threatened to sue them for defamation of character: "I have no problem getting legal involved for defamation, and for your various allegations on your takedown notice thread, and am happy to send a formal cease and desist letter from my lawyer" (quoted in Masnick 2014). As people learned of his actions, Queen came under brief but intense ridicule that resulted in his apologizing to the blog and backing down (McNally 2014). The short-lived conflict made clear that blogs like *Escher Girls*, *The Brokeback Pose*, and *The Hawkeye Initiative* are capable of touching nerves and eliciting strong reactions, both pro and con, in their critique of the male gaze in comic books.

The Hawkeye Initiative has a double meaning--it is both the name of a blog that reposts images and a more generic name for a type of drawing in which an artist puts side-by-side professional art of a female character and amateur art of Hawkeye, a male character, in the same position.

Art done for the Hawkeye Initiative serves as a visual argument about the distorting effects of the male gaze. Very little of the art comes with any written commentary at all, the art stands on its own as an argument. The composition is structured so that the viewer's eye moves from the official art of the female character to the amateur art of the male character, and a mental disjunction is created as the viewer realizes how unnatural and discomfiting the same pose is when executed by a male character rather than a female character.

The most obvious visual argument is in the way the characters' bodies are posed. Western (and other) audiences are so accustomed to seeing women drawn in positions that position them as objects of the male gaze that it no longer seems unnatural to have a female character in the middle of

a pitched fight scene drawn so that the viewer has a lovingly detailed view of her body, frozen and displayed. Once the character is male, however, it becomes jarringly obvious that the scene is being drawn not to clarify the action or move the plot forward, but to give the viewer an erotic object to gaze at. When Clint Barton, A.K.A. Hawkeye, is posed so that we can see his chest and his butt simultaneously, or with his legs spread wide, or with his chest thrust forward incongruously as he shoots arrows at a villain, the effect is ludicrous. When posed side-by-side with a woman in the same position, it forces an awareness that the woman's pose serves no purpose beyond objectification.

Sometimes the Hawkeye in the picture is aware of the ridiculousness of his pose: "Oh God," one version gasps in pain as he poses on one knee, looking backwards over his shoulder to show off his chest while kicking with one leg to lift his butt in the air (Brocreate 2012). Most of the time, however, the humor of the drawing is in Hawkeye's blithe lack of awareness that anything is out of the ordinary as he poses coyly for the gaze of the viewer. The reader's discomfort at finding a man splayed or draped across the page serves to make clear how unnatural female poses that have come to seem normal from repetition are.

In addition to showcasing the jarring incongruity of seeing a man posed like a woman, many of the Hawkeye Initiative pieces include visual commentary on the clothing choices made for female characters in comic books. One of the common feminist complaints with superhero comic books (and in the West there are few other genres of comic books) is that any human being involved in a pitched battle would be unlikely to wear "armor" that left the midriff or cleavage bare. Although some of the artists choose to render Hawkeye in his usual costume, which leaves only his arms bare, others give Hawkeye clothing that matches the clothing of the women with whom he is paired. Most commonly, Hawkeye is often put in a thong that leaves his legs and buttocks exposed, or given a low-cut shirt that plunges to his navel to mimic the common look with comic-book women. Interestingly, the drawings in which he is still in his traditional clothing make a clearer argument about the sense of the male gaze, as they make clear that what is problematic about objectifying art is not *necessarily* the revealing clothing, but more the way in which the character is posed and framed for the art.

A final way in which artists involved with the Hawkeye Initiative make a visual argument is in the facial expressions of the characters. Where the canonical Hawkeye usually looks the default determined, grim, and heroic, in the Hawkeye Initiative versions his gaze becomes bashful and downcast; or alternatively a sultry and seductively inviting look straight at the viewer. His mouth is more likely to be open--some comic book artists, most infamously Greg Land, are known for using women from pornography as a reference for in-combat facial expressions (Wood 2014), creating awkward fight scenes where women are supposed to be yelling but look oddly rapturous instead. There are a lot of pursed and pouting lips, a lot of half-lowered eyelashes--all making clear, by

drawing attention to how strange and unnatural it feels to see a man in the same role, how women are deliberately posed inviting men to stop and look at them.

The artwork of the Hawkeye Initiative serves as a visual argument about the way women are posed and drawn in Western comic books, but it would be a less powerful project if it were a one-person project. A great deal of the visual impact and argument comes from the fact that it's a decentralized, memetic movement, and that quality will be the focus of the next section of this essay.

Decentralized Movements and the Internet

The Internet is, of course, a breeding ground for decentralized circulation of concepts and images, and the Hawkeye Initiative takes advantage of this tendency. One artist, working alone, could never hope to produce the volume of parodic artwork necessary to drive home the point about the ubiquity of objectifying art in comic books. When the concept of the Initiative is opened up so that anyone could create art along the theme and that art could subsequently be reblogged by one Tumblr blog--but would still exist, scattered widely around the Internet in a variety of places--the idea becomes open source, available for people to expand on, riff on, and add detail to.

Looking at the blog *The Hawkeye Initiative* or Googling the term quickly reveals the wide range of artwork that was created for the concept. From detailed art that lovingly recreates the visual tropes of comic book art (detailed and accurate musculature, full color, with detailed background) to stylized, cartoonish drawings, people from a diverse set of art backgrounds contributed to the meme. This resulted in a very large sampling of distorted female bodies from the original texts, as well as a large assortment of visual rebuttals from many different people. Therefore, the Hawkeye Initiative did not seem like the work of one cranky person with an axe to grind, but like a concept that caught fire with many different artists in many different ways. By creating an idea that is easy to copy and replicate in a range of forms, the initial posters of the Hawkeye Initiative were making it easier to achieve a sort of critical mass of visual arguments that are harder for skeptics to ignore. In addition, the playful and tongue-in-cheek nature of the idea made it fun to join in and increased the number of people involved.

The concept of the Hawkeye Initiative caught on even outside the realm of drawn art when male cosplayers (people who dress up as characters) began to get in on the "game," attempting to pose in ways that match traditional art of comic-book women. Because most of the poses are not anatomically possible, the results are comically off. When you add the other aspects of the Hawkeye Initiative that bolster the visual argument--the unnatural body language, the sexualized poses, and the exaggerated facial expressions--the point is driven home once again, this time with live models. Poses that would seem "normal" with female models look strange and almost inhuman when done by male models. Cosplayers posted their pictures online and *The Hawkeye Initiative* blog reblogged them to

add to the accumulation of visual arguments. When the live-model shots are added to the art pieces, the visual argument becomes that much more compelling.

Conclusion

Between December 2012 and October 2014, *The Hawkeye Initiative* made 521 posts, most of them artwork or photography. The blog itself, as of January 2015, has more than three million hits, indicating a very high viewership. The Hawkeye Initiative was discussed extensively in niche news sources, and eventually got the attention of more mainstream news outlets like the BBC (“The battle,” 2013), *PC and Tech Authority* (Hollingworth, 2013), and *Wired* magazine (Hudson, 2012).

Whether the Hawkeye Initiative and other such projects have had or will have a long-term effect on the depiction of women in visual media is of course impossible to tell. However, it is notable for fostering a specific tone of argument--wry and ironic, based more on implicit visual claims rather than explicit, clearly stated claims. The audience is forced to fill in the nature of the implied argument--that if men look ridiculous and unnatural in such a pose and women do not, it reveals that we have come to find sexualized and objectifying art for women the norm rather than the exception. By placing a male character directly in the male gaze, the artists of the Hawkeye Initiative aim to create a sense of cognitive dissonance in the viewer, evoking both laughter and doubts as to the “naturalness” of the artistic representations we live with and experience every day.

References

- The battle against ‘sexist’ sci-fi and fantasy book covers. (2013, Jan. 18). *BBC News Magazine*. Web.
- Brocreate. (2012, Dec. 2). Is he human or is he dancer. *Tumblr*. Web.
- The Brokeback Pose. *Tumblr*. Web.
- Escher Girls. *Tumblr*. Web.
- The Hawkeye Initiative. *Tumblr*. Web.
- Hollingworth, D. (2013, May 15). Hawken plays with the Hawkeye Initiative, with fantastic results. *PC and Tech Magazine*. Web.
- Hudson, L. (2012, Dec. 5). How to fix crazy superheroine poses in comics? Swap them with Hawkeye. *Wired Magazine*. Web.
- Masnick, M. (2014, August 4). Comic artist Randy Queen now claims post about his abuse of copyright to stifle criticism is defamatory. *TechDirt*. Web.
- McNally, V. (2014, August 6). [UPDATED] Randy Queen pulls defamation threats, apologizes to Escher Girls blog admin. *The Mary Sue*. Web.

- McNutt, M. [Memles]. (2014, June 24). "This direction seems super male gaze-y." *Checks IMDB, finds 14 episodes of Ghost Whisperer* "Well, that explains that." *Twitter*.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen* **16** (3): 6–18.
- Wood, D. (2014, July 8). Greg Land to draw the new Spider-Woman comic. *Whatever a Spider Can*. Web.