

Resisting Patriarchal Constructs of Gender and Visibility Via Instagram

Historically, Hollywood narrative cinema has functioned in terms of binaries, such as the gender binary comprising the active male subject and the passive female object. Women have been hypersexualized and objectified on-screen to provide heterosexual visual pleasure. In other words, visual appearance has been historically controlled and determined by gendered norms. Now, in the twenty-first century, individuals have become visibility addicts due to the pervasiveness of social media, and these gendered norms are often reproduced in social media such as Instagram. Social media platforms have worked to fuel this visibility addiction, functioning to distribute accessible and visually pleasing images that are uploaded directly from a producer and instantaneously disseminated to an audience of consumers. I have used Instagram for years, but I never realized the kind of hyper-visibility Instagram provides. I also never considered the ways in which Instagram allows for normative binaries and systems of oppression to be challenged. The multifaceted nature of Instagram allows for the application to function as a powerful tool for resisting social constructs of gender and power. Using Laura Mulvey's frameworks surrounding vision and visibility, I will interrogate how Instagram functions as a scopophilic machine that reinforces patriarchal ideologies. More importantly, I will highlight how tangible resistance to patriarchal norms is particularly evident through the Instagram account of gender nonconforming author, performer, and speaker, [Alok V. Menon](#), who consistently challenges socially constructed norms of gender, subjectivity, and visibility via their Instagram platform, [@alokvmenon](#).

Instagram can work to reinforce patriarchal ideologies and oppressive structures of vision and visibility. Accounts like [@hollywoodactressmodels](#) echo

Mulvey's framework surrounding phallogocentric structures of vision, ones that prioritize the phallus and male heterosexual pleasure—translating to the male gaze. Mulvey explains “the paradox of phallogocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated women to give order and meaning to its world. An idea of woman stands as linchpin to the system: it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence” (14). In other words, women threaten phallogocentrism and imply castration simply by lacking a phallus. Moreover, not surprisingly, the women featured in this account are predominantly white, cis-gendered, and normatively beautiful. Through this account, scopophilia, “where looking itself is a source of pleasure,” functions to “reflect the dominant ideological concept of the cinema” (362-363). Mulvey's arguments are reflected within the content of this Instagram account, and the phallogocentric binaries of film and heterosexual pleasure are especially obvious in posts [one](#) and [two](#) (Appendix). Post one hypersexualizes actress Eiza González by focusing the image on her plunging neckline that reveals her chest and cleavage. The second post contains a reproduced movie scene where a woman spills coffee on her blouse and removes her shirt in front of her male counterpart. Her breasts and black lace bra are then exposed for the man, the audiences of the film, and the viewers of the clip, to gawk at and enjoy. The latter post uses hashtags such as #prettylittlething and, more disturbingly, #blacklivesmatter, presumably to garner more virtual traffic to the visually pleasing post and to further reinforce female objectification. At the extreme, this account regards women as erotic objects and fixates upon them to a point where sexual satisfaction comes from looking at these women (Mulvey 363, 366). The account seamlessly distributes heterosexual visual pleasure through Instagram—reinforcing male voyeurism and scopophilia. Consequently, women are objectified and subjected to a “controlling and curious gaze”—including the creator of the account and anyone

who views the posts (Mulvey 363). Teresa de Lauretis explains “Cinema defines woman as image: as spectacle to be looked at and object to be desired, investigated, pursued, controlled, and ultimately possessed by a subject who is masculine” (99). Like cinema, this Instagram account reaffirms how women are defined as images and by images. Evidently, Instagram can function as a voyeuristic-scopophilic machine that upholds patriarchal structures of film and visual pleasure.

However, Instagram can also function as a powerful tool for resisting patriarchal norms. Roberta Sassatelli explains that “technology shapes our visibility regime as much as the gendered shaping of our ways of seeing” (125). Multifaceted technology like Instagram has the capacity to shape visibility and ways of seeing. This is evident in Alok V. Menon’s Instagram account. Menon’s Instagram platform, [@alokvmenon](#), unlike [@hollywoodactressmodels](#), radically challenges those ways of seeing and provides visibility not only for themselves but also for marginalized groups. Their account serves as a platform for activism and social justice by highlighting resistance to gendered and patriarchal norms. In fact, posts [three](#) and [four](#) exemplify Menon’s powerful resistance to social constructions and categories (Appendix). Menon posts publicly and eloquently about why they are gender nonconforming and non-binary to an audience of 543,000 followers. They highlight the transcendent beauty in resisting social norms and binary ways of thinking. Menon articulates the importance of resisting constructs of gender, stating, “I want people to understand how scary the gender binary is and how we can get rid of it so that everyone can just...exist” ([Appendix](#)). Through these non-normative Instagram images, Menon resists constructs of patriarchal and gendered visibility, such as the female object and active male subject. Menon acts not as an abject individual, but

rather, as a subject who provides visual pleasure while disrupting patriarchal ideals of visibility and beauty.

Menon uses Instagram in a resistant way to challenge patriarchal notions of visibility, look, and gaze. Kaja Silverman explains that “the look has all along possessed the capacity to see otherwise from and even in contradiction to the gaze. The eye is always to some degree resistant to the discourses which seek to master and regulate it, and can even, on occasion, dramatically oppose the representational logic and material practices [that] specify exemplary vision at a given moment in time” (156). This concept is applicable to Menon’s Instagram posts, for Menon challenges the gaze, and makes themselves visible in a way that is resistant to discourses that seek to master them—such as socially constructed norms of gender or beauty. This is particularly resonant in post [five](#) which features Menon in a virtual keynote video educating the public about cultural transphobia and the impact of the gender binary for not just minorities. Menon opposes traditional patriarchal structures of vision by redefining who is visible and what ideals are expressed via Instagram—emphasizing revolutionary resistance to oppressive ideals. Understanding the systemic origins of anti trans violence, they highlight the dire need to dismantle and disrupt the gender binary. Similarly, in post [six](#) Menon educates others about the history of trans and gender nonconforming individuals (Appendix). Menon highlights how gender nonconforming people are not “new,” and Menon educates others on how even in 1940, trans people have resisted society’s gender norms at the risk of violence. Menon explains part of the incentive behind their platform, “If you don’t see us then we can’t exist, right? ... This is why I fight so hard to [#DeGenderFashion](#). Because I know my history. Because I honour those who came before me. Because so many people suffered so that I could be here” ([Appendix](#)). Menon is poignantly vocal about

resisting binaries of gender, visibility, and beauty in the tradition of their ancestors. Menon resists patriarchy through images, videos, and impassioned captions that can inspire tangible social change.

In posts [seven](#) and [eight](#), Menon exemplifies resistance to patriarchal norms by highlighting how others disregard their visibility by misgendering them and making assumptions about their gender based on gender norms. Judith Butler argues “The forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of “sex,” and this identification takes place through a repudiation which produces a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge” (3). Through Instagram, Menon eloquently rejects the phantasm of “sex” and embodies the subject who repudiates normativity within their Instagram posts. As a subject, they use their platform as a political vehicle to spread awareness of what it looks like living beyond binaries—emphasizing the freedom felt in living authentically. Butler also explains “collective disidentifications can facilitate a reconceptualization of which bodies matter, and which bodies are yet to emerge as critical matters of concern” (3). Certainly, Menon resists sexual constructs and they challenge what bodies matter by representing themselves as gender nonconforming and hairy, as is evident in post [nine](#), for they use the hashtag [#NothingWrongHair](#) in a hypervisible way that celebrates fluidity and challenges gender and sex binaries (Appendix). Menon acknowledges “that personal, intimate, analytical, and political knowledge of the pervasiveness of gender, [and knows] there is no going back to the innocence of ‘biology’” (De Lauretis 20). Consequently, Menon is threatening patriarchy because they do not adhere to constructs of “biology” and thus, they cannot be controlled by oppressive forces. Menon displays subjectivity, power, and agency through their Instagram.

Menon allows their account to remain resistant and visible despite receiving comments of hate. Sonja Vivienne and Jean Burgess explain that queer social activists “wish to catalyze social change by challenging popular stereotypes, rather than simply consolidate their values and affirm their identities among like-minded people. They wish to impact unknown, imagined, even antipathetic publics” (366). Menon’s Instagram page engages with a diverse range of viewers, and Menon responds to vicious comments with grace, as is clear in image [ten](#) (Appendix). Evidently, Menon chooses to educate ignorant commenters instead of tearing them down in a reciprocal manner, further resisting patriarchal norms with beauty and light. Clearly, Instagram allows Menon to maintain subjectivity even in the face of adversity. They represent non-normative visibility and complex fluidity despite being a continual threat to patriarchy and binary ways of thinking.

Menon resists normative and binary constructions of gender, vision, and visibility via Instagram. In Menon’s Instagram, the mainstream is marginalized, and the marginalized become mainstream, because of their visibility and purposeful resistance to the patriarchal norms that Mulvey emphasizes in her essay. Menon has subjectivity through their platform, and they recenter ideals of the gaze and the look by focusing on non-normative opposition to power and patriarchy. Menon provides hope to those who are marginalized by positioning themselves as visible and active in the continual fight for social justice. Although it is clear patriarchal norms can be reproduced through Instagram, Menon uses the political potential of Instagram and their hyper-visibility as a form of tangible resistance to patriarchal norms. They reimagine constructs of visibility and binaries of gender—ultimately inspiring social reform.

Appendix

1. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFJdT5hTWo/>
2. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFByihBpAXG/>
3. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGNuNdiHyc1/>
4. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHBpopbBSzb/>
5. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGsYeGHh1W2/>
6. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CI4Ln5EhBnV/>
7. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIZNIGBBZFk/>
8. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGnGeAjhhQT/>
9. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIjohRnBG6t/>
10. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CItnzkhhzKC/>
11. <https://www.instagram.com/hollywoodactressmodels/>
12. <https://www.instagram.com/alokvmenon/>

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