

Objectification in Modern Media: *ELITE*

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ABSTRACT

Modern media has been acclaimed as one of the most influential ways to get across various messages to its viewers. With the continuous evolution of technology, popular media has become widespread, shining light on important issues. Although this evolution has been accompanied by many changes, stereotypes regarding women have remained constant. Many shows and series have tried to challenge traditional gender roles, such as an “independent” female protagonist in a traditionally “male” industry or a male character exhibiting many “feminine” traits. Although these depictions are a departure from traditional concepts of gender, most modern shows fail to meaningfully develop and showcase their portrayal of different genders. *ELITE*, a popular series on Netflix, is one show that continues to showcase numerous examples of gender stereotypes. Officially launched on Netflix on October 5th of 2018, the first season of this Spanish show has been viewed by no fewer than 20,000,000 viewers. *ELITE* centers around three working-class teenagers struggling to survive in a prestigious school in Spain, a poignant critique of classism pervading the campus. At the same time, signs of different types of objectification are specifically directed towards female characters. In order to explore the ways this show objectifies women, I analyzed how the characters’ actions, along with different film techniques, clearly show objectification throughout the film. How does the Netflix show, *ELITE*, objectify women and girls and rely on stereotypes? How does the objectification in the series reinforce sexist behaviors among its viewers?

Literature Review

There are three articles that provide the foundation of this analysis in *ELITE: Objectification* by Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women on the Market* by Luce Irigaray, and *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* by Laura Mulvey. The first article, *Objectification* by Martha C. Nussbaum, states seven different ways to identify objectification: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity. Nussbaum defines each of these as seven ways to “treat a person as a thing.”

“Instrumentality: The objectifier treats the object as a tool for his or her purposes.

Denial of autonomy: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination.

Inertness: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency and perhaps also in activity.

Fungibility: The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types.

Violability: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary-integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into.

Ownership: The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.

Denial of subjectivity: The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.” (Nussbaum, 257)

Then, the author lists specific examples from texts, captions, or images to show how these are applied in literary contexts. The second article I will be referring to is *Women on the Market* by Luce Irigaray. *Women on the Market* highlights that a woman's value is solely determined by the desire men have for her, not necessarily by her intrinsic qualities. It mentions the distinction between quality and quantity and how the quantity of women significantly overrules their qualities. However, this focus on quantity over quality is exempted in one case—purity. Here, the three “traditional” roles of women as the virgin, mother, or the prostitute come into play as the purity of a woman is an intrinsic factor that matters to men. Similar to objects, the more untouched the women are, the more desirable they are. The trade among the same sex, male, is also mentioned with regards to how the interaction and trade among men determines the perception of women through a “ho(m)mo-sexual monopoly” (Irigaray, 171). The author integrates Marx’s analysis of commodities with this text in order to put into analogy how women exist in patriarchal societies. The last article, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* by Laura Mulvey, illustrates how cinema affects pleasure. The article discusses the incorporation of different cinematic techniques that can impact the way viewers perceive women both inside and outside films. The article sheds light on two important topics: scopophilia and voyeurism. These two topics essentially carry similar meanings; scopophilia is focused on the male gaze, while voyeurism is the practice of anyone receiving pleasure from looking. The cinematic techniques identified in this article show certain camera angles and positions inciting scopophilic behaviors in male viewers. Examples of directors and their movies are provided, and the author analyzes how the movies’ setup of the female figure affects viewers. Overall, all these articles play an essential role in analyzing objectification in *ELITE*. The devices used to identify objectification and their real life examples contribute to determining to what extent *ELITE*, a relatively popular, modern, and new show to Netflix, traditionally depicts and objectifies its female characters.

Season 1, Episode 1: Marina

Voyeurism, scopophilia, and the three roles of women in society are the three main themes of objectification that are shown in *ELITE*. The unfortunate treatment of women can be identified using the seven ways of objectification, cinematic techniques, and the ways the female characters are manipulated in the scene. Although the majority of the scenes hint at moments of objectification, a specific scene in episode 1 of season 1 clearly represents the three roles of women in society. Marina, a female character, is discussing her coming-out party with her family. At her parents’ suggestion to invite one of the new scholarship students, Marina’s brother interjects, mentioning an incident that happened to Marina last year with one another student with a scholarship. The family goes silent and immediately tries to avoid the topic afterward. This unspoken incident alludes to Marina’s HIV. It is suggested she was infected with HIV after becoming involved with the scholarship student the year prior. Marina explodes and yells at her family, screaming that it has already happened and that it shouldn’t be something to conceal anymore. Her mother, in particular, expresses her disgust; Marina leaves the room.

This coming-out party scene is an important example of the impact of the traditional gender roles; those roles are used to debase Marina. A coming-out party is a party that celebrates a woman’s purity, where a young debutante is officially introduced to society. Marina mocks her mother’s wish to host this party for a virginal young lady looking for a boyfriend. Here, Marina acknowledges which role out of the three women in society her family is trying to objectify her as: the virgin. Women are generally separated into three categories: the virgin, the prostitute, and the mother. Based on her past, Marina fits none of those roles, but her parents urge her to take the form of someone who hasn’t lost her purity, a virgin. This scene directly connects to the article by Luce Irigaray, *Women on the Market*. *Women on the Market* speaks about the manipulation and trading of women, trading in this sense not necessarily being physical. The coming out party symbolizes a kind of trading of Marina. First, a trade of her identity, and second, a trade of her status as a woman in society: a “prostitute” to a virgin. A trade of her identity is clearly shown in different times in the scene, not only when the coming-out party is mentioned. Whenever Marina speaks about her HIV, her family stays quiet. However, they do not listen to what she says. Physically, they can hear her, but they do not take her voice as something to genuinely be taken into account. They merely disregard her and her opinion, which also

disregards her agency. This part of the scene connects to another article, *Objectification* by Martha C. Nussbaum where she explains the seven different ways of viewing a person as a thing. Marina's opinion is silenced, and her agency is disregarded. This shows inertness in the way that Marina's whole family is silencing her voice. Her identity is disregarded in this scene as something not to be taken seriously. The coming out party itself is a party that shows women off to society, generally showing that her identity as a minor is coming to an end with the launching of the party, which portrays maturity and growth. A trade of her status as a woman is blatantly shown throughout this whole scene. Purity is an important aspect for a woman to keep, as it determines their "quality" and heightens their desirability to men. Everyone except Marina in this family seems to have conformed to the gender stereotypes of a woman having more value when deemed a virgin. Marina continuously stands up for her truth and mentions her HIV as something not to be ashamed of, but her family constantly shuts her down and pressures her to act as if she never lost her virginity or got HIV. This is shown by the way none of her family members openly discuss the incident; they try to act like it never happened in the first place, which connects to the article by Irigaray. Irigaray mentions that the only way for a woman to be considered valuable is for a man to deem her as so. For a man to deem a woman as valuable, it's either for that man to have a large quantity of the women or for the man to obtain the woman purest of all. This scene in *ELITE* refers to the latter, with Marina's family refusing to admit that their child, whom they want to be "desired" by men in society, doesn't take up the role of a virgin as they want her to.

Season 1, Episode 1: Carla

On the contrary, one of the scenes in episode 1 of season 1 shows a different way of objectifying women. Here, Carla, a character with a boyfriend, has sexual intercourse with another male while her boyfriend watches. As she begins to undress, the other male, Christian, hurriedly takes off his garments. While they have intercourse, the room door opens and Carla's boyfriend Polo peeks in. Instead of reacting as if Carla has cheated on him, Polo and Carla maintain eye contact while Carla reacts to Christian. Carla, is being objectified, and is as a victim of scopophilic behavior from Polo. As Christian remains oblivious to the fact that Polo is watching, he is naively thrown into a situation where he is actually engaging in this objectifying act.

Polo peering into the room where Carla and Christian are having intercourse clearly shows his voyeuristic desires. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* by Laura Mulvey discusses this in greater depth. The article not only refers to these fetishes but also provides examples of different types of films or movies that illustrate those fetishes. It states that films such as *Only Angels Have Wings* and *To Have and Have Not* show that the woman is made to be sexualized and seen by the male protagonists in the film and male viewers outside the film. Then, the article provides examples of two specific directors: Hitchcock and Sternberg. Whereas Hitchcock's films both demonstrate fetishistic scopophilia and voyeurism, Sternberg's films show mainly fetishistic scopophilia. This scene in *ELITE* corresponds more accurately with Sternberg's example: the woman is viewed as an object through the male gaze. Some of the cinematic techniques used by Sternberg are closeups, camera angles, and uses of screen depth, affected by factors such as light, shade, lace, steam, foliage, net, streamers, etc. as quoted in the article. The cinematic techniques such as closeups and different camera positions in *ELITE* emphasize Carla as an object. At the beginning of the scene, the camera shows Christian and Carla jumping into bed, but later, the camera angle quickly shifts and shows Polo coming close to the room, sneaking around to see if he could take a look. It then switches to a closeup of Christian and Carla, as if the camera is set up in a closed-off spot where one wouldn't be able to see the action clearly. The camera zooms in on Carla's face and body, showing every moment that Carla feels pleasure. The angles change between the closeup of Carla to Polo, where the camera actually shows that he's peeking inside the room to see Carla. From the way the camera is used in this scene, there can be many different interpretations as to how specifically Carla is being objectified. The close-up angles of Carla's face provide emphasis on her pleasure and how the existence of the penis is making her feel. Since Mulvey's article states that the fear of castration is what leads men to assert their dominance and need to feel empowered, Christian pleasuring her deems Carla as one who is the passive, obedient object. This close-up of her face is directed mainly toward Polo, who sees her facial expressions and reactions, and can also be directed to the

male viewers outside of the show, therefore inciting these scopophilic behaviors. The close-up angles of Carla's body provide a similar effect but are more directed to the viewers than Polo. The close-up shots of her body incite scopophilic behaviors in the male viewers, putting them in the perspectives of Christian and Polo as if the viewers were witnessing something that should not be seen. The camera angle also has an impact on the way Carla is portrayed. Instead of showing the whole scene to the viewers, the directors placed the camera in a way that makes it look like the viewers are peeking through a door. If the scene were filmed openly, it would not necessarily incite the scopophilic feelings that the male viewers gain from the way the scene is directed. These cinematic techniques can have a big impact on the way male viewers position themselves in the scenes: either simply as the spectator or the male protagonist. By using those angles, closeups, and by just the plot itself, Carla is the woman being objectified as being in the center of the male gaze.

Season 3, Episode 3: Carla

Season 3, episode 3 contains a conversation between Carla and her father. Here, Carla's father discusses the terms of Carla's family's current financial situation and what should be done in order to maintain their family's status. The scene begins with Carla's inquiry about where her mom is, and the conversation then leads up to the investors 'party that Carla's father was planning on attending. After Carla declines to attend and insists on taking care of her mother instead, Carla's father then brings up how devastated her mother is because the winery isn't doing well. He talks about how the family business is slowly slipping into bankruptcy, and how they desperately need investors for the business. Carla is forced to attend the investors 'party, and then Carla's father tells Carla to flirt with Yeray, a rich boy who may be able to revive her family business. Carla denies her father's request to flirt with Yeray, but Carla's father threatens that if Carla doesn't flirt with Yeray, she'd be disappointing both her parents. He ends the conversation with "do what you have to do" and the scene ends.

This scene explicitly shows the manipulation of women. Carla's father uses Carla to entice a potential male investor to invest in his family business. By forcing her to perform and use her sexuality to do his bidding under threat that the family would be harmed otherwise, he is manipulating his daughter in order to save his family's business. This concept of manipulation directed towards women is further explained in the article *Women on the Market* by Luce Irigaray. It discusses the monopoly of men, or more so the homosexual monopoly, where Carla is considered as a product of trade between her dad and Yeray. The homosexual monopoly is well shown in this scene as Carla's father demonstrates that Carla's interaction or potential relationship with Yeray can be given in exchange for the money that'd be going into his business. Unlike what the article states, however, this scene values the quality of the woman more so than the quantity of the women. Since Yeray is attracted to Carla specifically, her father views this situation as a win-win since Yeray would be emotionally satisfied with Carla, and Carla's father, financially so. The woman that Yeray seeks to date is Carla, therefore it is Carla's identity that makes this trade unique, as it is not just a common trade between men with multiple women. When more deeply analyzed, though, this plan only benefits the two men in this exchange. Referring back to *Women on the Market*, it says that "the circulation of women among men is what establishes the operation of society, at least of patriarchal society (Irigaray, 184)." Although the woman, in this case, isn't exactly invaluable, she is still portrayed as an object that is traded to keep both parties of men satisfied in their trade. Therefore, it keeps the patriarchal cycle going, as these two men would benefit while the woman would not, as she is forced into an interaction with a man she does not want to interact with. Along with *Women on the Market*, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* by Laura Mulvey can also be referenced as the article discloses the potential traditional plot of a film where the woman becomes an "object of the combined gaze of the spectator and all the male protagonists in the film (Mulvey, 63)," shown in the scene. In this scene, Carla seems to represent the woman, and Yeray seems to represent the protagonist. Carla's father acts as the director of a show, setting Carla and Yeray up in the traditional plot stated by the article, where Carla is in the center of the male protagonist, Yeray's gaze. This scene

in *ELITE* depicts the nature of men portrayed in the articles: their manipulative instincts towards women, their exchange of women as objects only for their benefit, and the traditional plot in order to provide the male figures pleasure and benefits.

Season 4, Episode 4: Méncia

In episode 4, season 4 of *ELITE*, the character Méncia is introduced as the daughter of the new principal at the school. Despite the fact that she is a minor, she works as a part-time prostitute. In one particular scene, she is shown working as a prostitute. However, as the male in this scene puts handcuffs on her, she tells him that she isn't sure she is willing to commit the act anymore. Despite her clear discomfort, the man forces her to do it, saying that if she denies it, she's being unprofessional. This scene is relatively short compared to the other scenes, but it shows a clear way in which Méncia is being entirely objectified by not having her rights to refuse acknowledged and respected.

In *Objectification*, Nussbaum describes how instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, ownership, and denial of subjectivity can strip a person of their humanity and convert them to an item. In this particular scene, the male treats the prostitute in action, Méncia, with instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity. Méncia is shown as a representative of the prostitute role, and as the occupation of a prostitute generally refers to the satisfaction of the receiver, the male in this scene takes advantage of her occupation and uses Méncia merely as an object he can use in order to satisfy his needs, implying that her occupation makes her less of a person who has the right to deny him. In this scene, Méncia states that she is uncomfortable with the course of action taking place, but the male refuses to abide by her wishes of stopping due to the fact that she has been "paid" and that she is being "unprofessional," meaning she is not fulfilling her duties as an object to please him for his personal purposes. Along with instrumentality, denial of autonomy, denial of subjectivity, and inertness all play a very similar role. Because the male denies Méncia's right to refuse, he ignores her autonomy and self-determination. As stated above, her occupation causes the male to believe that her sole job is to satisfy and pleasure him; his response denies that she is also human, not just an object for him to merely earn pleasure from. Inertness ties into these two notions, as her involvement in prostitution makes him believe that she lacks the agency. As mentioned above, this scene shows the male putting handcuffs on Méncia, and he does not unclasp the cuffs when she tells him that she is not willing to participate. The handcuffs show that she is physically bound to the bed and also to him, as now her ability to act is limited due to a dominant figure in the bedroom without her consent. In addition, denial of subjectivity is shown as the male figure doesn't take Méncia's feelings into account by forcing her to participate in pleasuring him. Instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, and denial of subjectivity, in essence, are all represented in the scene. Ownership comes into play here when the male mentions Méncia's occupation. As explained above, the connotation of prostitution isn't portrayed as something positive. As Luce Irigaray states in *Women on the Market*, the virgin is the only role in which the woman's intrinsic qualities are valued for. Prostitutes, on the other hand, are the opposite of the virgin. Rather than having their intrinsic qualities valued, their title makes it so that their quantity is far more desired than their internal values by men. As Méncia is the prostitute here, the male figure denies her all rights and uses materialistic values such as money in order to force her into committing this act, connecting back to ownership where the male is treating Méncia as something that can be bought or sold. Due to these particular ways Méncia is denied the right of consent, the several different ways of objectification shown by Nussbaum and her role as a woman in society further elaborated by Irigaray shows how Méncia is objectified by the male in this scene.

Methodology

In order to analyze how objectification and stereotyping occur in the series, I will focus on certain specific actions and dialogues of characters. These elements will be discussed to see how characters objectify their female counterparts. Factors such as tone and language will be the focal points of the dialogue, and facial expression, posture, and gestures

will be the central focus of analysis of the character's body language shows certain behaviors. Along with the actions and dialogue of the characters, another important component to consider is how the camera angles show certain scenes. Close up shots of certain parts of the body (e.g. arms, legs, face, buttocks, breasts, etc.) can indicate objectification. These two specific points--one analyzing what the characters are saying and doing and the other what the people behind the camera are doing--will be the factors I will be taking into account when analyzing how *ELITE* shows objectification and stereotyping of females.

Discussion

Although the show *ELITE* mainly focuses on the life of teens with a major wealth gap, it showcases several aspects of objectification throughout. Starting from season 1, Marina's loss of her virginity is ignored due to her family's desire to keep her purity and reputation for males, Polo's voyeuristic behaviors are shown, Carla's father's manipulation of Carla is portrayed, and lastly, Méncia's right to consent is denied. By drawing on concepts developed in the articles *Objectification*, *Women on the Market*, and *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, I was able to analyze the way specific actions from other characters in *ELITE* objectify the female characters. Through this analysis, I recognize how traditional plots that objectify women are used in films despite the films being a part of a "more evolved" modern media. *ELITE* shows that traditional concepts of objectification in the plots remain the same.

This analysis showed the ways *ELITE* only objectified females, but I'd like to broaden my scope of research and further investigate how objectification is linked not only towards sex/gender, but also in terms of sexuality, more specifically towards LGTBQIP2SAA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, pansexual, two-spirit, asexual, ally) characters. I want to see whether characters who are not straight are still objectified depending on their gender, or if the factor that determines objectification is based on their sexuality in those instances. As there are many characters who are part of the LGBTQ+ community in *ELITE*, I want to explore their particular characters and determine if external factors come into play in objectification when sexuality is involved.

Conclusion

This analysis showed the ways *ELITE* only objectified females, but I'd like to broaden my scope of research and further investigate how objectification is linked not only towards sex/gender, but also in terms of sexuality, more specifically towards LGTBQIP2SAA characters. I want to see whether characters who are not straight are still objectified depending on their gender, or if the factor that determines objectification is based on their sexuality in those instances. As there are many characters who are part of the LGBTQ+ community in *ELITE*, I want to explore their particular characters and determine if external factors come into play in objectification when sexuality is involved.

Exposure from shows like *ELITE* can easily affect the way male viewers perceive females in real life. Through the different ways female objectification is shown, the male viewers could be easily influenced and in turn adapt the way the male character objectifies the female character. *Men's Objectifying Media Consumption, Objectification of Women, and Attitudes Supportive of Violence Against Women* by Paul J. Wright and Robert S. Tokunaga illustrates the correlation of exposure to media such as pornography, men's magazines, and reality TV and men's view of women. The results in this study claim that "the paths from pornography exposure ($b=0.24$, $SE=0.08$, $p=.001$), men's magazine exposure ($b=0.20$, $SE=0.08$, $p=.008$), and reality TV exposure ($b=0.15$, $SE=0.08$, $p=.05$) to the objectification of women were all at or below the significance threshold. Thus, more frequent exposure to objectifying media was associated with stronger notions of women as sex objects" (Wright & Tokunaga, 1960). As this study states, the more frequently viewers are exposed to media that shows objectifying behaviors, the stronger they will perceive women as sex objects. Therefore, by watching *ELITE*, it is plausible that male viewers will adopt an attitude normalizing the objectification of women. This study confirms Laura Mulvey's claim in 1970 shown in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* stating that the male gaze is primarily constituted of the ego.

Limitations

Whilst gathering data for this study, most of the limitations I faced were rooted in trying to determine what aspect of the show to focus on in order to analyze the scenes. Initially, I chose to analyze how both the dialogue and the actions of the characters showed female objectification, but I ended up focusing on how characters' specific actions and the plot affected how certain female characters were objectified. Instead of focusing on small parts of the dialogue, I concluded that it would be ultimately better to portray how the different character plots and characters' actions in *ELITE* can overall show a better representation of female objectification. Another limitation I faced was diversifying the sources of my data. Since they are all from one show, the data in some cases were repetitive and conveyed the same notion as the others. In order to provide different ways female characters can be objectified, I picked out the four scenes I believed could refer to different articles in showing the variety of ways the female characters were objectified.

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