RETHINKING THE POLITICS OF IN_VISIBILITY POST #METOO?

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_Abstract

This essay offers reflection upon recent transformations in thinking about and understanding the *in_visibility* of gendered, embodied selves which is a more digital and a more diverse version of the 'in/visibility' of my 2015 text, *The Politics of In/Visibility: Being There*. Both iterations include the interrelationship between visibility and invisibility. In this essay, using Laura Mulvey's conceptualization of the gaze, looking and being looked at, and Judith Butler's analysis of the impact of trans politics, I address changes which have arisen since I first worked on in/visibility through two recent developments: The first is #Metoo as a highly effective social media platform, where politics conducted online has had actual, material, embodied effects on people's lives; the second includes the impact of trans politics in challenging everyday assumptions about gender and especially the binary logic and embodied properties of sex, citing the example of sport, where bodies matter. Sport has always been divided into men's and women's competitions, at least since women have been allowed to participate at all. Recent changes, subverting traditional patriarchy and the binary logic of sex have been contentious, but also offer exciting new ways of exploring in_visibility in relation to bodies, representational systems and subverting inegalitarian, traditional systems, both actual and virtual, which act oppressively and restrictively.

1_Rethinking the Politics of In_Visibility post #Metoo?

Gendered visibility is changing, from how gender is defined to how it is experienced and how people identify with gender. Post pandemic, we have had to rethink what being visible means. Is virtual visibility on a par with actual visibility: on screen or in the room? Also, the speed with which trans activism has impacted upon everyday life, especially in challenging assumptions about visible manifestations of gender difference, has posed a whole lot of questions about how we define gender and difference. This essay revisits some of my earlier research, published in 2015,[1] on the sexual and gender politics of in_visibility, in light of the more recent explosion of the public visibility of gender effected by the #Metoo movement,[2] which, although it was first established in 2006 by Tarana Burke, it was 2017 when it reached Hollywood and hit the very public, celebrity stage. Gender was put into discourse, that is, it was possible to think about gender as argued by Michel Foucault.[3] He argued that once there is a name or a label for a set of physical characteristics and practices, we can think about it and talk about it. For example, in terms of sexuality, homosexuality thus becomes a label, a name grouping together some of the things people do and feel. Now, it is possible to think about gender as a fluid category and as an oppressive force, which has been visibly named and identified in publicly mediated, very visible debates. In the

case of the Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein, firstly, the assumptions of male power were identified and named in public debates. Secondly, those who spoke out were women in the acting profession, who had been subjected to sexual harassment and promised success in films if they acquiesced and kept quiet about the abuse:[4] The first two women who spoke out in 2017 represented the tip of the iceberg and were quickly followed by many more, including well-established, famous actors like Romula Garai, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Angelina Jolie, who joined aspiring early-career hopefuls in speaking out in the press, online, on television, and on the radio. As it gathered momentum, the strongly gendered story made the front pages and the top of the news in the USA and in the UK.

#Metoo became a social media tool which enabled women all over the world albeit in different ways, to speak out and to give voice to their experience, drawing attention to the extent of sexual harassment and violence against women and, for the male establishment, to how masculinities are made and remade. #Metoo and other such movements—such as Everyday Sexism,[5] founded by Laura Bates in the UK 2012, which might hitherto have been confined to less visible social groups and networks, including feminist activists and women's groups—burst onto the public arena, especially in the USA and the UK. What difference did this make to sexual politics and the claims of the women's movement especially, that women have been, to use the title of Sheila Rowbotham's seminal book, hidden from history?[6] Women were visible and audible, voicing their distress about how they had been treated, and not only visible as celebrity figures conforming to patriarchal norms, but speaking out against what had become routine harassment and sexual abuse; so taken for granted that these practices were invisible. Movements such as Everyday Sexism gave voice to a myriad of 'ordinary' women for whom sexual harassment was a routine occurrence in the street, on trains and buses, at work and play, and often, in the most extreme forms, in the home. Gender is descriptive and explanatory. Gender, as a descriptive characteristic, can also be used to explain inequalities based on corporeal properties and representational capacities which create visibilities. At the same time, critical voices, including #Metoo founder Tarana Burke, have pointed out that the experiences of Black women and girls have not received equal attention in the public negotiation of sexual violence although they face a higher risk of sexual violence than white women and girls.[7]

The invisibility of women has long been a theme in feminist critiques of social relations, whether in the public terrains of politics, culture, and social institutions, or in everyday encounters, the domestic arena, and intimate relations, where women have been subsumed into family and heteronormative norms and practices. Visibility has been strongly interrelated to physical, corporeal presence which can be interpreted as visibility. Feminist arguments have suggested that not only were women underrepresented in institutions and systems of power and influence, but even if they were physically present, they were invisible. Even when women made it to the boardroom or higher echelons of government, they remained invisible and unheard. Good ideas contributed by women have often been attributed to men,[8] which suggests that patriarchal cultures operate to render women invisible, even when they are physically present in a dynamic that is exacerbated when other categories of difference, such as race, sexuality or age, are included in the mix.

The relationship between 'being there' and 'being seen to be there' is complex. Representation is a dynamic process, involving refraction, which is mediated, rather than simple reflection, whereby an image or symbolic system represents 'reality,' that is, what is there. Representation is connected to the systems and technologies which enable representative processes. There is also a complicated, contingent relationship between sentient, physical presence and perception. The gaze may be mediated by cultural assumptions about gender, as film theorist Laura Mulvey argued,[9] but it also has the potential for democratization and transformation, as she later acknowledged,[10] and as we know most intensely, post Covid-19, between actual and virtual visibility and presence when virtual visibility has a new materiality and actuality. Being present virtually became more intimately imbricated with actual physical presence so that the virtual created the actual and the two are at times indistinguishable. During the pandemic, especially during periods of lockdown, so many people became dependent upon and familiar with virtual technologies and media for all our relationships from the most personal and intimate to routine work meetings. I Zoom therefore I am.

My main questions in this short piece are about the meanings which greater visibility can bring in an age of contentious, oppositional views, often expressed in their most extreme forms on social media such as Twitter, for example between trans activists' views and gender-critical approaches, which are highly visible on social media. Linked to this recent phenomenon is another aspect of visibility expressed in the

tensions between visibility and 'being there.' In the 2015 text, I developed the idea of 'being there' to explain the importance of not only being physically present, seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling, but also being seen to be there. Women, especially older women, can be there but be invisible and unnoticed. In order to explore the dynamics of perception and affect, involved in 'being there,' I conceptualized an embodied gaze, building on Laura Mulvey's development of the (male) gaze.[11]

2_The Gaze

Laura Mulvey's initial theory and her reconceptualization of the gaze in film theory, especially in relation to Hollywood, remain useful and relevant to thinking about in_visibility more widely, not least because they link unconscious feelings with social forces. Although initially inspired by cinematic manipulation of images and representations, 'the gaze' is a theoretical framework for making sense of looking and seeing, especially in relation to gender more widely. The gaze addresses questions about why and how women see and are seen in film. Mulvey's theory does assume a binary logic of sex, which has its own limitations, but it does have the virtue of subverting hierarchies and demonstrating how it is possible to deconstruct patriarchal, heteronormative assumptions. Sometimes we see what we want to see, or what our culture enables us to see. Mulvey argued that women, for example in film and in the media, are viewed and thus become visible through the male gaze, through which women view themselves. Thus, women see themselves and other women through men's eyes. Traditional Hollywood films are framed by scopophilia, which eroticizes women's bodies through the male gaze, which thus controls looking.

Subsequent work that builds on Mulvey's ideas has explored a 'female gaze,' whereby women do not see themselves through men's eyes but are able to take control and both take responsibility for ways of seeing and creating images and themselves outside the constraints of patriarchy.[12] Literary scholar and activist bell hooks proposed the concept of "oppositional gaze" to point to the specifics of Black spectatorship and the ignorance of racism in white American feminist film criticism, and emphasized the possibilities of resistance and critique of the gaze.[13] Similarly, the democratization of the gaze[14] suggests a challenge to the hegemony of patriarchy and the promise that the oppressed and marginalized can question existing forces and exercise autonomy and offer some reaction and resistance to the patriarchal constraints

of Mulvey's 1975 thesis, which she later modified to accommodate a female gaze and address socio-cultural change.[15] What remains important, however, is the idea of social, political and cultural systems mediating the process of looking and plugging in to unconscious needs and desires, which may of course also involve reinforcing traditional hierarchies as well as producing new ways of looking. Visibility is complicated and a number of different forces are implicated. What we see and experience is not a simple ocular event where the object of sight accords directly with what is seen. Visibility is mediated and complicated, and sometimes how we see ourselves is not entirely rational. We may also fail to see what is there and, more importantly, who is there, because we do not expect to see them or our cultural expectations deny the likelihood of their being there. It may not be expected to see women in positions of power and authority, especially older women. Looking and seeing are structured through the reflected image as in a mirror.[16] The complex, two-way processes of perception and of looking and seeing are not entirely fluid, but are subject to the operation of social forces, such as patriarchy and racism, which can render women and black people invisible as well as sexualizing and objectifying how women are seen.

Control of the image and representational systems are particularly pertinent to an exploration of gendered in_visibility in order to effect the subversion of the lack of visibility of those who are marginalized and indeed absent from positions of power. By making people visible and allowing them to speak, it becomes possible to think differently. This is just what #Metoo has achieved. You have to be seen and heard in order to participate in social life. Thus, in_visibility is a political issue. It is not surprising that it is a prime concern of social movements which challenge political and economic orthodoxies, and that the internet provides a platform on which to speak and to be seen and heard.

#Metoo seemed to explode upon the scene, especially in the USA and the UK, in 2017, when film producer and co-founder of Miramax Harvey Weinstein was arrested, but it had been a long time coming. It was the moment when a man with enormous power, who seemed beyond the law and any challenge, was eventually toppled from power and all the abuse which he had perpetrated was made visible,[17] notably through social media, especially Twitter, with invitations to 'ordinary' women to respond. #Metoo seemed to be different from earlier feminist campaigns in its wide appeal to such diverse groups of women which captured the zeitgeist and seemed spon-

taneous. On October 18, 2017, two years after it first started, #Metoo linked everyday routine experience to the spectacular lives of the famous. In 2017 it was all about famous names and Hollywood, but, more significantly, it was a challenge to patriarchal power, which had both long been made by second-wave feminisms and had also long been a routine feature of everyday life for most women. Many survivors of abuse were seen and heard in a highly visible, public challenge to patriarchy.[18] Within hours of Alyssa Milano's tweet inviting women who had been sexually harassed or assaulted to write 'Me Too' as a status, there were tens of thousands of replies and 500.000 #Metoo tweets the next day.[19] The actual prosecutions of male abusers, including some very visible and powerful men, revealed practices which had for so long been assumed to be innocuous or even welcomed by the perpetrators, but were now identified for what they were, namely abuse. At this historical moment, women started looking *back*: Women were not only looked at but became active agents in the process by both speaking and looking back at those perpetrators of abuse and their collaborators, who sought to silence them and render their autonomy invisible.

It is also interesting in relation to Mulvey's conceptualization of the gaze, initially developed in the context of film and cinema, that the site of these revelations and transformations was Hollywood, where those films were made. This moment presents a disruption to the male gaze, a possibility which Mulvey later recognized,[20] when women started looking back. The Weinstein case and those which followed are particularly interesting because they demonstrate the dynamic nature of the gaze and its potential for change as well as the particular pertinence of the cinematic context. Hollywood may have been long steeped in patriarchal traditions and practices, but it is a site at which these traditions and practices can be challenged and transformed. The technologies of representation are crucial to cultural processes of representation.

3_Being There

I used the concept of 'being there' in my 2015 work to embrace both the actuality of presence and its representation, or virtuality, in the sense of French media theorist Jean Baudrillard's distinction between the actual and the virtual,[21] and the centrality of enfleshed sensation, which includes bodies and sensations such as feelings, emotions, pleasures, and pains. Visibility and representation are not disembodied: neither is perception. Bodies play a significant part in being seen. For many people, espe-

cially women over 50, having an embodied presence does not necessarily mean that they are visible. This is partly attributable to the sexualization of women and the concomitant assumption that older and post-menopausal women lack the sexual attractiveness demanded by patriarchal cultures and are thus irrelevant and invisible. Young women may be present and visible in ways they do not welcome, or some aspects of their visibility mean that they are objectified and sexualized in oppressive ways.

'Being there' is about empirical presence, but whether you are actually visible or invisible is a more political matter, i.e., one involving power relations, which requires theoretical explanation. Feminist discourses have drawn attention to the politics of 'being there' and 'being seen to be there.' Nonetheless, being attentive to empirical presence can be an important corrective to the invisibility of marginalized groups, such as, in the case of #Metoo, women and girls.

Empirical presence can be virtual and actual. Following my 2015 analyses of how the virtual and the actual are in conversation and not separate and discreet, I use the concept of 'flesh' and 'enfleshed selves' as including sentience, feeling, and emotion, which can be experienced in both actual and virtual worlds in the process of looking. The meeting of the real and the virtual is most well known in Baudrillard's arguments about the co-constitutive nature of hyperreality where the virtual and the real collide,[22] although I would not go as far as he does in asserting the primacy of the virtual because bodies, flesh, and materiality offer very real constraints as well as possibilities. Virtual worlds in social movements like #Metoo are *real* in both experience and affect. Tweets can express deeply and strongly felt emotions and record embodied experience. #Metoo brings feminist focuses upon bodies and representation into virtual worlds, which can serve as political platforms and as the motor of change and political action.

Gender, along with many other categories of person, has been increasingly recognized in data collection, the compilation of algorithms, the collation of marketing information, and classification of governance at all levels from the United Nations to local governments.[23] In the UK National Health Service in 2022, sometimes the only item of personal information about a person in receipt of care has very recently become their preferred pronoun. This might suggest that gender has become more visible, although it has also become more complex and there have been challenges to the binary logic of sex, some liberatory and productive, others challenged by some femi-

nists. For example, there has recently been a move in maternity services to eliminate the word 'mother' and to describe those previously known as 'women' as 'people with cervixes,' which might be an attempt to render gender invisible or at least neutral.

These moves could be construed as promoting greater inclusion and not privileging one gender over others or a biology-based binary logic of sex, or, less generously, as a clumsy bureaucratic response to a new politics of gender which renders motherhood invisible in one of the very few places, historically, where it has been visible. Motherhood has long been an absent presence, assumed by and yet left unrecognized and unstated in western culture and notably in the monotheistic religions which have traditionally shaped social and cultural practices.[24] Maybe it is unsurprising that labouring women have been upset by their reclassification,[25] although the dissatisfaction of women in receipt of UK maternity services is much more likely to be concentrated on the dire problems of the National Health Service and a shortage of midwives in particular and financial resources in general. In this instance, restructuring the language used to de-gender parenthood and render maternity invisible may divert attention from material social inequalities. If you are invisible, you are not part of a political collective, which can offer resistance.

4_In_Visibility of Categories and Trans Politics

Trans activism has led to some very ambitious changes within a short period of time, especially in the field of sport, in which, with competitions and whole sports and events reserved for men or for women. Intersex athletes have presented 'problems' for governing bodies of sport, which have endeavored to assign such competitors to either one of the only two sexes they have recognized. Sport has been remarkably slow in the past, firstly, in allowing women to participate at all. Even when women have competed at national and international levels, they have largely been invisible in global media platforms until very recently. Secondly, sporting regulatory bodies have developed inappropriate, insensitive gender testing (originally called 'sex verification,' whereby 'experts' judged the external physical characteristics of suspiciously 'masculine-looking' women athletes in insensitive and humiliating parades[26] against the athletes' will). Another aspect of visibility in this discursive field has been the gendering of bodies, with powerful female athletes being described as 'masculine' on

the basis of musculature, height, and comportment, as for example in the case of 800-metre champion Caster Semenya.[27]

Decisions by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) to change the criteria by which eligibility for women's competitions were judged in 2016, so that trans athletes could compete in women's events without surgery, meant that the only criterion has become testosterone levels. In elite sport, there are clearly physical advantages which those who were born and raised male have over their female counterparts and the notion that you are the gender you say you are has been contested by female athletes, for example in cycling, where male cyclists have transitioned at the end of their careers as elite male competitors. There has never been any debate about trans men as it has always been agreed that those born female who transition as men could not be seeking advantage by doing so, nor could they present any danger to cis men, for example in contact sports.

I mention the sporting example because it is highly visible and it matters to a large number of followers, fans and participants. Changes in the regulations seem more dramatic in sport than those involving the impact of trans people in many other areas of social life, where the question of gaining advantage would be unlikely, especially given the transphobia which operates in so many cultures. Sport has long excluded women from participation, gender testing of women was carried out regularly throughout the 20th century, sport is particularly disadvantaged and the changes were introduced very fast. The visibility of trans athletes is striking also because sport has always been so binary. This example, although much is still being hotly debated, especially the participation of trans women in women's sport, but it does suggest that binary logic has been subverted by trans politics and challenges to some of the restrictions of a superstructure built on the notion of two sexes, the parameters of each being determined by biology, albeit often in the public arena of the media, which is characterized by spectacle and extreme controversies largely fabricated by the media.

Categorization of sex/gender has traditionally been widely seen as dependent upon external, visible characteristics, but this has been subverted, most notably theoretically by the work of Judith Butler, for example in *Gender Trouble* (1990), where she argued that gender is performative and made through iterative acts, rather than being dependent upon the biology of sex.[28] Trans activism and the visibility of transgender

which has led to changes in legislation and practice in much of the Global North, which means we are asking questions about sex and gender and challenging everyday assumptions about, firstly, what we mean by gender and, secondly, how gender is formed. It cannot just be based on what you see, as the learned experts on the IOC gender verification boards must have found, not that they allowed much questioning, I suspect. Trans throws assumptions about visible gender difference up in the air.

Butler argues more recently[29] that gender categories change in shifting sociocultural circumstances and that it is not at all surprising that the category of women should expand to accommodate trans women too. Butler's arguments have always been, firstly, subversion, whether in the visible, playful subversions of drag or in more serious challenges to causal links between sex and gender. Secondly, she suggests that we make gender through iterative practices so that gender norms can change as gender is enacted and recreated. Butler also, rather optimistically, suggests that trans men might subvert hegemonic and even the more recent toxic masculinity and provide alternative futures for the category of men. The possibility of transforming oppressive social worlds, for example the cultures of masculinity that promote violence against women, give Butler's critique appeal across a broad social and economic political spectrum, rather than being the preserve only of identity politics. Another strength of Butler's approach is the emphasis on the connectedness of different forms of oppression and exclusion such as racism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia, which she describes as working across differences, rather than setting boundaries around identities. Sex and gender, like race, have been claimed to be based on visible difference. In_visibility is political not only through campaigning as in the #Metoo example, but also through questioning the relationship between visibility and invisibility, questioning assumptions, as well as the sociocultural processes involved in looking, seeing, and being looked at.

Although classificatory systems may ultimately be limiting—even those, such as LGBTQI+, which have the enormous advantage of making visible identities which were hitherto both proscribed and invisible, may nonetheless have limitations as categories. The + may not be enough to enable the dynamics of change and the potential for transforming categories, crossing boundaries, and establishing connections. Connections—both empirically between disadvantaged groups, which can come together in activism to fight oppression, and politically and theoretically in seeking the sources

of exclusion—make it possible to overcome oppression and discrimination and to understand better the complexity of inequalities in order to realize a fairer, more equitable set of relationships and a just society. Connections are made possible through challenging exclusion and invisibility, and by making protagonists as well as their arguments visible.

5_Conclusion

One of the aspects emphasized in the summary of my earlier work is the social nature of in_visibility. Social, cultural, economic, and political forces are in play in influencing what is visible and what is not and who is seen and who is absent. In recent years virtual worlds have dominated perception even more than ever before and it becomes imperative that we have some understanding of how meanings, in this case about gender, are made and displayed through processes of representation.

Mulvey's original thesis on the gaze still has purchase, not least because it incorporates inner and outer worlds and helps us make sense of gender as a complex mix which brings together unconscious and social forces. The male gaze may indeed no longer be the only one, but the processes of looking and of being looked at remain pertinent especially in relation to virtual worlds, where 'being there' takes on different meanings and may involve being in a particular network, following certain influences, or just streaming and binge-watching. Visibility is still central to these experiences.

Although they have had material, actual outcomes, social movements and activism, like that of #Metoo, have often been initiated, as the # suggests, on social media. The considerable visibility gained here is expressed in the quantitative dimensions of 'being seen.' Recruiting large numbers of followers on social media is not inevitable, but such campaigns have clearly found the zeitgeist and hit the right spot with large numbers of people, especially women. They have garnered high visibility for different reasons: because of their followers who feel interpellated by such campaigns which speak to their experience and because, in the case of #Metoo, they were taken up by very visible people and achieved celebrity following as well as celebrity targets.

The actual impact of the campaigns is embodied because abuse concerns the bodies of those who suffer at the hands of actual embodied abusers. Virtual worlds are

embodied and bodies are implicated in the discussion of the in_visibility of gender. Sometimes it seems as if bodies and flesh are invisible because people are relating in virtual worlds. But people are enfleshed, and bodies and biology are not synonymous, as I did argue in my earlier work. Although bodies and enfleshed selves are less prominent in this short piece, it is worth revisiting the importance of bodies as both limitations to individual projects and as having the potential to change in relation to the social worlds they inhabit. Bodies restrict change, not least because they age, become infirm, are subject to illness, and ultimately die, but they also have the promise of change. Bodies are the site of feelings, emotions, and the inner worlds which Mulvey includes in her explanation of the gaze. Seeing and looking include a wide range of sensations which shape experience and perception. It is also difficult to think about gender or sexualities without bodies, whatever virtual experiences may be available. The binary logic of sex leaves a strong legacy which retains enormous power to shape how we see the world and how we classify people in it. As Butler says, dimorphism is pretty ubiquitous in the world of living beings, but that does not mean that there are no exceptions—which there clearly are, for example in terms of intersex. Nor, importantly for the discussion here, does it mean that social worlds are fixed forever and determined by the binary logic of sex. There is diversity across time and space and, as has recently become evident, ideas about gender can change very fast, especially when the debate is highly visible.

Trans offers a challenge to understandings of how gender is made as well as subverting some ideas about bodies. The debates about transgender identities throw into question both the relationship between sex and gender and how gender identities are perceived; what is associated with having a gender identity? These subversions follow Butler's original suggestion that sex as well as gender are made through social and cultural practices. So, when a baby is born and is wrapped in a pink or a blue blanket, the parents and attendants have shared the cultural assumption that the ways in which this baby behaves and the manner in which others address and describe it are all somehow determined by a biological fact, rather than being a set of cultural norms. What is visible (and invisible) is culturally made, which means that change is possible, especially if the demand for change is put into discourse and made visible, and thus thinkable.

Demands for change, especially in the public arena, can be oppositional. If they involve gender, they can be the subject of sensationalist reporting across the media. This has led to some very contentious debates between different groups, such as between trans activists and gender-critical theorists. Butler's approach has something to offer to reduce the introspection of such conflicts by locating the challenge in the wider terrain of politics and by arguing for collective action; for example, the political left needs to combine forces to combat all sources of inequality, including racism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia.

The need for combined action to address the widespread global social inequalities and injustices, which have been further highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic, provides a good note upon which to end this short discussion of in_visibility.

_Endnotes

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