

Flowers and Ropes

The Female Body and Female Sexuality in Lana Prins' *Naiko*

How are female sexuality and the female body represented in the photo series Naiko by Lana Prins, when looking at the eight photographs from a feminist and sex positive perspective and with special attention to Laura Mulvey's notion of the male gaze?

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“I am done living in a world where women are lied to about their bodies; where women are objects of sexual desire but not subjects of sexual pleasure; where sex is used as a weapon against women; and where women believe their bodies are broken, simply because those bodies are not male. And I am done living in a world where women are trained from birth to treat their bodies as the enemy.”
Emily Nagoski, *Come As You Are* (2015).

Introduction

"I want to show the viewer pieces of my life. Whether it's something that actually happened in that split second, or something that's totally staged, my photos always show my feelings of that exact moment." With these words, Lana Prins describes the essence of her work. In addition to visualizing her emotions, Prins states on her website that her photographs depict topics that, according to her, should be talked about more openly. These topics include intimacy, both with oneself and with others, and the expression of the human body and human sexuality (Prins). Her work consists of photographs portraying dreamlike fantasies that often feature female models lost in their own sensuality and unaware of the camera. These images of young women shamelessly and aesthetically embracing their sexuality intrigue me and make me want to dive deeper into Prins' work. One photo series in particular, called *Naiko* (date unknown, image 1-8), named after the woman starring in the series, stands out to me due to its depiction of rope bondage. The series consists of five photographs of Naiko, who herself is a photographer, tied up with ropes in combination with three photographs of (dried) flowers. The series is published in *Self-Control Magazine*, a digital and printed publication founded in 2015 by Marco Giuliano, that features photo series by artists from all over the world. Some series promote the fashion items that are worn by the model, but what most of them have in common, is their depictions of young, scantily clad women. The aim of this publication is described by the following sentence on the "about" page of their website: "Mind controls the desires and we will show you what happens when the self is consciously losing control" (*Self-Control Magazine*).

With their careful composition, soft colors and intriguing content, the photographs possess an aesthetic quality that makes it difficult to look away. Initially, I labeled these photographs as sex positive and empowering, until the more critical, cultural scientific part of my brain directed my attention towards the type of woman that is portrayed and the way in which she and her sexuality are represented. Not only do I feel like there is an under-representation of women who are not white, young, slim and conventionally attractive, but I also wonder whether this celebration of the female body and her sexuality is simultaneously objectifying her. These photographs remind me of the traditional representation of the female body as a spectacle and sex object for (male) pleasure, as described by Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) and

explained in this research. The contradicting feelings that Prins' work evokes in me inspire me to write my bachelor thesis on her work. In her collection of essays *The power of the image* (1985), Annette Kuhn acknowledges that it is possible for feminists to derive a naive pleasure, possibly resulting in feelings of guilt, from looking at images that are considered to be deviant from the feminist ideology. She also argues that accepting this enjoyment does not take away from the quality of a critical analysis of the image and that such readings offer an additional pleasure: not the pleasure of rejecting the enjoyment that is derived from the image, but that of rejecting the visible power structures that evoke the criticism and guilt in the first place (Kuhn 8). With my research, I want to recognize the enjoyment that Prins' photographs give me, while still being able to critically reflect on them.

My research is positioned within the field of feminist theory. Relevant for my research is, on the one hand, Mulvey, whose interest lies in the uncovering of the objectification of women in society by analyzing the representation of women in classical Hollywood films. On the other hand, there is the sex positive movement that counters sex negative ideologies by striving towards more openness about topics surrounding sex and sexuality and the acceptance of expressions of and experimentation with sex and sexuality. The reason for me to include sex negativity and positivity in my theoretical framework is because I agree with what Natalie Perfetti-Oates states in "Chick Flicks and the Straight Female Gaze" (2015) about how the voyeuristic gaze in general and the male gaze in particular can be connected to judgments about the sexuality or sexual behavior of the observed object. This connection is explained in more detail in the second half of the first chapter. Besides, with rope bondage being a fundamental element of *Naiko* and with me questioning how female sexuality is portrayed, I find it necessary to mention sex positivity and sex negativity. My method is based on how Mulvey applies her theory in an analysis. She addresses the objectification of women by looking at how cinematic tools, like the narrative, framing, editing and music, represent the women on screen in relation to their surroundings, particularly men and their gaze. This way of analyzing is based on semiotics, a research method that focuses on how the different elements in visual images relate to each other to create representations and produce meaning (Kuhn 4). Similar to Mulvey's analysis, mine is structured around semiotics. However, not all aspects that Mulvey discusses, like the narrative, editing and sounds, are relevant for my research, since these are not present in photography. Therefore, I only look at the photographic tools that produce meaning

according to semiotics, like the framing, composition and *mise-en-scène*. The way in which my analysis is performed, is inspired by how Kuhn studies and interprets the representation of women in photographs with a close reading analysis in her aforementioned collection of essays, meaning that I first give an overview of my theoretical framework, followed by a visual analysis that is connected to the discussed theories.

The central focus and essence of my research can be summarized with the following question: How are female sexuality and the female body represented in the photo series *Naiko* by Lana Prins, when looking at the eight photographs from a feminist and sex positive perspective and with special attention to Laura Mulvey's notion of the male gaze? To answer this question, my research is divided in multiple sections that each discuss a sub-question. The first section of chapter one is centered around the question of what Mulvey's theory on the male gaze entails, which means that I give an overview of my theoretical framework that explains the perspective of my analysis. The second section of chapter one addresses the question how Mulvey's theory on the male gaze can be connected to sex positive feminism, despite their difference in interests. In addition, this chapter provides background information on rope bondage that is helpful for my analysis. These first two sub-questions mainly give insight into the perspective of my analysis and explain why elements of *Naiko* may be interpreted in a certain way. My analysis consists of two parts: the first two parts of chapter two focuses on the sub-question how the female body is represented in *Naiko*, while the third part focuses on how female sexuality is represented. These questions provide enough information to conclude my research by answering the research question, which consists of my interpretation of the representation of the female body and female sexuality within *Naiko*, based on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", the ideology of sex positive feminism and my analysis.

Chapter 1. The Male Gaze and Sex Negativity/ Positivity

An explanation of the theoretical framework is necessary to understand the feminist and sex positive perspective with which *Naiko* is analyzed and interpreted. The first section of this chapter provides an answer to the sub-question: What does Mulvey's theory on the male gaze entail? Only those elements of her theory that apply to this research are discussed, since her insights about narrative, editing and sounds are unnecessary in a study about photography. The second section of this chapter addresses the following sub-question: How can Mulvey's theory on the male gaze be connected to sex positive feminism? In addition, this section contains background information on sex positivity, sex negativity and rope bondage that will be useful for my analysis.

1.1 The Male Gaze

Laura Mulvey's Theory on the Male Gaze

Mulvey's analysis of the male gaze, as explained in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", is based on classical Hollywood films, so commercial black-and-white films from the 1930's until the 1960's (Smelik 269). As mentioned in the introduction, she focuses on how cinematic tools represent the women on screen in relation to their surroundings, especially men and their gaze. For her analysis, Mulvey understands visual representations to be structured within a system of rules and conventions regarding the expression and interpretation of meaning. This system and the meanings that are produced with it, can become visible in images, which can be analyzed with the use of semiotics (Sturken and Cartwright 12). Semiotics, thus, is the study of how meaning is produced by visual elements and codes within images and representations in society. To a spectator, the meanings that are created by cultural objects may appear as natural, while they are actually culturally and ideologically produced and internalized (Kuhn 5). Take, for instance, a depiction of the femme fatale, an attractive, but deadly archetype from the 1940's and 1950's Hollywood film noir tradition. In this period, ambitious women were viewed as a threat for men on the work floor and women in general were expected to remain financially and sexually dependent on men (Boozer 21). This patriarchal idea is visualized in film by conveying the message that a dominant woman, like the femme fatale, needs to be punished, often resulting in her death

(Boozer 23). Only when these culturally produced constructs are questioned and criticized, like Mulvey does, does the ideological nature of this representation come to the forefront.

The ideas and ideologies that Mulvey attempts to uncover are patriarchal in nature. Therefore, she connects her analysis to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical notions of phallocentrism and castration anxiety. In a phallogentric society where men are dominant, women, as the opposite sex, are portrayed as the flawed Other that reminds men of their sexual difference. Within patriarchal unconsciousness, a woman's lack of a penis makes men think of the castration she has had, giving them the anxiety that they could experience the same fate (Smelik 270). Being castrated would be synonymous to a loss of power and pleasure (Dirse 18, Mulvey 348). The result of women regarded as the Other, is that they end up carrying the meanings that the dominant group has given them according to the fantasies and obsessions of this group, instead of creating their own (Mulvey 343). Mulvey states that there are two ways in which men can deal with the castration anxiety that the difference in women's bodies gives them: with sadism or by fetishizing the female body. In sadism, a woman is demystified and kept under control or punished, which usually manifests in acts of violence or even death, and in turn causes a feeling of pleasure for the spectator. When it comes to fetishistic voyeurism, the object that causes fear, in this case the woman, is turned into a reassuring object by magnifying its physical beauty (Mulvey 348). Here, cinematic tools are used to turn the woman into a spectacle that makes the spectator forget about her lack and his anxiety (Smelik 271). Both methods are present in the *femme fatale*.

Another Freudian term that Mulvey uses, is "scopophilia", or the pleasure that is derived from looking. When it comes to the scopophilic gaze, the people that are looked at become objects of control by the one who is looking (Mulvey 344). Mulvey ascribes an erotic dimension to film, for the spectator can enjoy the voyeuristic gaze without being interrupted by the subjects of their gaze looking back at them (Smelik 269). In 1972, the book *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger was published about the production of meaning through images. In the book, Berger remarks how men act (in other words, look) and women appear (or are being looked at, Kuhn 4, Smelik 269). Mulvey applied this idea of scopophilia being divided among the sexes to classical cinema by analyzing how the man is portrayed as an active spectator, while the cinematic tools that are used turn the woman into a passive spectacle (Mulvey 346). An unbalanced, hierarchical system is created around the pleasure of looking based on the sexual difference between men and women (Dirse 18).

Mulvey distinguishes between three different actors that perform the male gaze: the camera that captures the scene, the characters on the screen and the spectator that watches the end product. A visual image automatically forces the spectator to take on a certain role, so a female spectator watching a film where the male gaze is at work, inevitably has to look at the scene on screen through the eyes of a man (Mulvey 352). When this female spectator is forced to take on the objectifying male gaze, she is forced to look at the women on screen being reduced to mere objects of her gaze. According to Mulvey, a female spectator is unable to identify with this gaze (Perfetti-Oates 19).

Criticism on Laura Mulvey's Male Gaze

The way in which Mulvey divides scopophilia between men as active spectators and women as passive spectacles, causing women to be unable to identify with this gaze, has resulted in criticism. Mulvey is said to oversimplify scopophilia by ignoring the pleasure that women might derive from watching a scene that is filmed through the male gaze (Perfetti-Oates 19). To address some of the criticism that she received, Mulvey dedicated an essay to the role of the female spectator, called "Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Inspired by "Duel in the Sun" (King Vidor, 1946)" (1981). She begins by stating that the gaze of the spectator is masculinized, regardless of the sex of the spectator. This masculinisation may hinder a woman from enjoying the film, but this is not necessarily the case. Mulvey herself expresses her love for Hollywood melodrama, despite being aware of the patriarchal representations of women (Mulvey 12). This is similar to what Kuhn wrote about feminists enjoying, and possibly feeling guilty for enjoying, content that does not align with the feminist ideology, as mentioned in the introduction of this research (Kuhn 8). According to Mulvey, male desires gain materiality through the narratives of cultural objects (take for example Hollywood films who provide the point of view from an active man), while female consumers of these objects have to adopt trans-sex identification as a habit and second nature, causing restlessness, conflicting desires and the feeling of an unstable sexual identity (Mulvey 13). Here, Mulvey argues that deriving pleasure through the male gaze does not come naturally, so even though she acknowledges that it is possible for female spectators to derive pleasure from looking at a woman through the male gaze, she holds on to her initial point about women being unable to identify with the male gaze.

Kuhn interprets the experience of a female spectator when confronted with the male gaze in a different and, in my opinion, more fulfilling way than Mulvey does. Kuhn's analysis and interpretation is not based on classical Hollywood films, but instead on softcore pornographic photography in men's pinup magazines, meaning that her interpretation is based solely on visual signs, like the composition and framing of the photograph and the point of view of the camera. She writes that "(...) masculinity is not the same as maleness, even if it may be conventional in our society to construct it so." By this she means that both men and women are capable of possessing masculinity and therefore of taking on a masculine point of view and deriving pleasure from images of women that are being subjected by the male gaze. Kuhn also gives another possibility of how a female spectator might enjoy such imagery:

A spectator (male or female) has the option of identifying with, rather than objectifying, the woman in the picture. The photo might evoke memories or fantasies of similar pleasures enjoyed by the spectator. In this case, the pleasure of looking is not completely voyeuristic (Kuhn 31).

Since I agree with Kuhn on this matter, I want to reject Mulvey's dichotomy between men as active spectators and women as passive spectacles. Women are able to take on the male gaze, whether this gaze is internalized by habitual reinforcement as Mulvey argues, or whether it is because "(...) masculinity is not the same as maleness (...)" as Kuhn writes. This also means that women are as capable as men to enjoy non-feminist imagery and, in addition, create sexist art (Mulvey 13, Kuhn 31). Even though Mulvey's theory on the male gaze has been criticized for being oversimplified and outdated, I argue that aspects of her theory are still relevant in contemporary society, where, despite the progress of the feminist movement, patriarchal ideologies remain present. What these aspects are and how they occur in a present-day photo series by a female artist, is demonstrated with my analysis in chapter two.

1.2 The Gaze and Judgments About Sexuality

Sex Positive and Sex Negative Judgments

Before analyzing *Naiko*, I want to explain why sex positivity and negativity are included in this research. As mentioned in the introduction, my decision for this is based on Perfetti-Oates' essay "Chick Flicks and the Straight Female Gaze". In this essay, Perfetti-Oates not only calls Mulvey's theory outdated for ignoring the heterosexual female gaze that may derive pleasure from the sexual objectification of male bodies, but she also argues that sexual objectification in general is often linked to sex negativity. By this she means that judgments about someone's sexuality and sexual behavior can be attached to the representation of said person, which can be of any gender. These judgments can be either positive, for instance when one's sexuality is celebrated, or negative, when the represented person is punished for their sexuality, take, again, the femme fatale. The example that Perfetti-Oates gives has to do with the objectifying of men in chick flicks for a heterosexual female audience. She remarks that a male character that is classified as sexually appealing does not "get the girl" and that his sexuality is something that has to be overcome, in contrast to the love interest that is deemed as less attractive, but presented as the better, more stable option (Perfetti-Oates 18). Therefore, within a sex negative discourse where sex is regarded as inherently bad, expressing one's sexuality becomes something that has to be punished and something that one has to be ashamed of (Glickman). Even though Mulvey herself does not use the term sex negativity, in her essay containing her afterthoughts she does mention the negative attitude towards women who decide to follow their desires and embrace their sexuality, including the shame that women themselves feel when they allow their sexual desires to be expressed (Mulvey 15). Thus, the reason for me to include sex negativity and positivity in my theoretical framework is because I recognize that the voyeuristic gaze can be connected to judgments about the sexuality and sexual behavior of the observed object.

While sex negativity encompasses the negative attitude towards everything having to do with sex, sex positivity can in turn be regarded as anti-sex negativity (Glickman). Sex positive feminists advocate for the expansion of sexual rights, freedom, experimentation and ways of sexual expression. Their ideology reacts to repressive, homophobic and transphobic discourses about sex, that mainly have their roots in conservatism and religious dogmas (Fahs 272). Gayle Rubin explains these conservative ideas about sex in "Thinking Sex" (1984), by pointing out the distinction that is made between what is considered to be good sex and bad sex. Good sex is classified as heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, with persons of the same generation, in private,

without the use of pornography and with only bodies. Bad sex, on the other hand, is the complete opposite, so homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, commercial, alone or in groups, casual, cross-generational, in public, with pornography, with manufactured objects or sadomasochistic (Rubin 108). This distinction heavily relies on the myth of normality, the false belief that there is a norm that everyone is supposed to follow (Glickman). Those who do not comply to the norm are regarded as deviant (Rubin 101). The sex positive movement, however, celebrates diversity. Carol Queen, for example, described the sex positive community people who “(...) don’t denigrate, medicalize, or demonize any form of sexual expression except that which is not consensual.” (Fahs 272).

Sexuality Expressed with Kinbaku in *Naiko*

The sex positive movement still faces a lot of challenges, but so far, the movement has achieved a considerable amount of progress when it comes to its anti-sex negative ideology (Fahs 280). One practice that has gained more acceptance and popularity, despite it continuously being considered as a taboo in wider society, is rope bondage (Pennington 74). With rope bondage appearing in five of the eight photographs of *Naiko*, I find it necessary to add some background information on the practice. Rope bondage has its origins in Japan and is also called kinbaku (緊縛) or shibari (縛り, Pennington 44). Even though rope bondage in itself is not inherently masochistic or sadistic, meaning that it is not exclusively performed to experience or cause pain for sexual pleasure, the practice is often put into the context of BDSM (Bondage, Discipline/ Dominance, Submission/ Sadism, Masochism). This is an umbrella term for a variety of sexual identifications and consensual practices, with the emphasis on consensual, like the inflicting of physical pain or restriction and the adopting of roles that indicate a particular power relation (Pitagora 45). From here onward I will use the term kinbaku in the rest of my research to loosen the connection of rope bondage to stigmas, while still acknowledging the erotic aspect of the practice, and to emphasize its artistic dimension and ritualistic Japanese roots.

In Japan, rituals concerning religion and agricultural prosperity have been present since the origin of Shinto and the ritual practices of this religion have been extended to all aspects of daily life. Take for instance the Japanese tea ceremonies or the ritualistic massage practice shiatsu. Important to note is that, when it comes to kinbaku, the end result is not the most significant part of the practice. The ritual itself and the performance around it,

especially when an audience is present, are the main goals (Pennington 44). The artistic dimension of kinbaku is elaborated on in the first part of chapter two, where Naiko's body as a work of art is analyzed. Important to note is that these different aspects of kinbaku (kinbaku as an art form, performance and ritual and kinbaku as a source of sexual pleasure) are not necessarily clearly separated from each other. Instead, all aspects exist together within the practice of kinbaku.

Summary

In this chapter, I have explained those aspects of Mulvey's theory on the male gaze that are most relevant for my analysis. These aspects have to do with the division of men as spectators, who give meaning to that what they observe, and women as spectacles, who are given meaning to as opposed to creating their own meaning. Even though Mulvey has received criticism for this dichotomy, her observations regarding the objectification of the female body, including observations about sadism and fetishism as tools to cease castration anxiety, still hold relevance within a patriarchy. After describing Mulvey's theory, I explained how both negative and positive judgments about one's sexuality and sexual behavior can be present when the voyeuristic gaze is applied, which I connected to the sex positive movement. Additionally, with kinbaku as a main component of *Naiko*, I provided some background information on the practice, that will be elaborated on in the analysis. This theoretical framework gives me enough information to start analyzing and interpreting the representation of the female body and female sexuality in *Naiko*.

Chapter 2. The Female Body and Female Sexuality in *Naiko*

Now that the perspective with which *Naiko* will be analyzed is clear, it is time to focus on the representation of the female body and female sexuality in the photo series. My analysis is divided in three parts. The first two sections look at the objectification of the female *body* in general. To reject Mulvey's dichotomy between the man as active spectator and the woman as passive spectacle, the term voyeuristic gaze is applied instead of the term male gaze. The second part of the analysis dives deeper into the representation of the female body by focusing on fetishism, one of the coping strategies for castration anxiety that Mulvey mentions. The other strategy, sadism, is discussed in the third section of the analysis, which is centered around the representation of female *sexuality*. The first two sections of this chapter revolve around all photographs in which Naiko is shown (image 2, 4, 6, 7 and 8), while the last section also includes the photographs of the flowers (image 1, 3, 5).

2.1 Objectification: the Female Body as Spectacle

In order to analyze the representation of the female body with regard to the voyeuristic gaze, I focus on whether the tools of photography put Naiko in a position that objectifies her body or not. To do this, I mainly pay attention to the way Naiko's body is framed and positioned, the point of view of the camera and elements of the *mise-en-scène*, like the lighting and clothing. When it comes to the framing, what is most remarkable is that Naiko's head is only visible in image 8. Image 2 shows how Naiko is tied with her hands on her back and her knees together in front of her. Only the lower part of Naiko's breasts are within the frame, so her nipples are not visible. Image 6 is similar to image 2 in the sense that Naiko is positioned in the same way with her hands on her back and her knees in front of her, but here, the photograph is taken from the back. Image 4 only shows Naiko's upper body, from her neck to the top of her rib cage. Also in image 7, Naiko's chest is visible, as well as her hips and the upper part of her legs. None of these photographs, except for image 8, include Naiko's full body. With her head being absent, Naiko is unable to acknowledge the spectator. Even in image 8, where the profile of her face is captured, Naiko is positioned in a way that prevents her from returning

the gaze of the spectator with her own. Instead, she wears a distant stare. Similar to what Mulvey said about the spectator and its voyeuristic gaze in film, since the person in the image can not look back, there are no obstacles that prevent the spectator from enjoying the voyeuristic gaze. As Kuhn mentions in her analysis of softcore pornography, the photograph “(...) can be looked at for as long as desired, because the pursuit of pleasure will never be broken by a returned look” (Kuhn 28).

In addition to the gaze of the spectator not being returned, which creates the opportunity for voyeuristic pleasure, Kuhn adds that the bodies of the models in photographs like these are composed in a way that allows the spectator to “(...) get a good look (...)” at everything (Kuhn 32). With Naiko displaying her naked body for the eye of the camera, this is the case in all photographs, but this comes to the forefront in particular in image 4 and 7. In image 4, Naiko is wearing a rope around her upper arms and throat, which appears to force her arms to be pulled back and her head to be tilted backwards, causing her to display her chest for the camera. This means that her breasts are the main focus of the photograph, especially since the background is white and without any objects. In image 7, Naiko is laying down on a fluffy, pastel pink rug. The hip harness that she is wearing, consisting of bright blue ropes around her waist and upper legs, does not seem to require her to arch her back, but she is positioned this way nonetheless. Here, she also exposes her bare chest by lifting her arms above her head, that, as mentioned, is out of frame.

Naiko displaying her body by being positioned in a way that invites the voyeuristic gaze, gives the photographs an air of exhibitionism (Kuhn 33). If a photograph possesses exhibitionist qualities, it takes away the shame that a spectator might feel, since his or her gaze is invited by the person that is on display (Kuhn 44). When it comes to exhibitionism in this photo series, the presence of kinbaku seems to create tension between the voyeuristic gaze and sex positivity. On the one hand, Naiko uses her body to showcase the techniques and designs of kinbaku and the neatness with which the ropes are tied. From a voyeuristic perspective, Naiko is nothing more than a mannequin displaying the work of the rigger and is, thus, again reduced to an object. On the other hand, one could argue that by presenting the practice of kinbaku as an art form, Naiko’s entire body is turned into a work of art. The ropes and Naiko’s body need each other and have to become one to form a artwork together. Their oneness is captured in a mostly empty space, as if they are positioned in a museum. A sex

positive interpretation could thus be that Naiko's naked body is being celebrated through an artistic expression of sexuality.

This possible sex positive interpretation of the way in which Naiko's body is framed and portrayed, however, does not take away from the fact that her body is portrayed in a fragmented manner. According to Mulvey, showing close-ups of body parts directs the attention of the spectator to the superficial parts of a person instead of on the complexity of their personality, which turns them into a spectacle (Mulvey 347, Smelik 270).

Fragmentization can function as a *pars pro toto*, as a part of the body that substitutes for the person as a whole. Here, a person is reduced to a particular body part or the function of that body part because of the attention that is directed towards it (Kuhn 37). Take for example image 4 of Naiko's chest. Naiko displays a part of her body that signifies her sexuality and sexual difference to the male body in an exhibitionist manner, while the rest of her body is out of frame, creating a sense of eroticism (Mulvey 347). Additionally, leaving body parts out of frame has the reductionist quality of deeming everything that is not visible to the spectator as irrelevant and insignificant (Kuhn 40). When Naiko's gaze is not depicted, not only her face is ignored, but also her thoughts and emotions that can be read from the expression that she carries. Essentially, fragmentization is a way of fetishizing someone and a tool for the dehumanization of a subject (Kuhn 37). However, could it be possible that the presence of kinbaku requires a certain degree of fragmentization? With only parts of Naiko's body being tied instead of her entire body in some of the photographs, it is possible that Prins purposefully fragmented Naiko's body in order to emphasize kinbaku. Even though this does not take away the objectifying and dehumanizing effect that fragmentization has, it can be a way to justify why fragmentization is applied.

2.2 Fetishism: the Perfect Female Body

As mentioned before, Mulvey states that there are two ways in which men deal with the castration anxiety that women bring out in them: with fetishism and sadism. The next two sections focus on whether these strategies are present in *Naiko*, since an analysis of the fetishistic qualities in the photographs deepens my interpretation on the representation of the female body, while an analysis of the sadistic qualities gives more insight into how female sexuality is portrayed. As discussed before, Mulvey states that fetishizing a woman, so

amplifying her physical beauty, acts as both a substitute and a mask for her lack of a penis, which eases the castration anxiety that she causes (Mulvey 11). When it comes to exaggerating someone's beauty, societal ideas of what is considered to be physically beautiful, in other words beauty standards, have to be taken into account. First, I analyze the type of body that is depicted by looking at age, skin color and body type, since society tends to deem one type of woman as more attractive than the other. Then, I analyze how this body is portrayed by looking at the photographic tools as mentioned in the previous section.

The first thing that stands out when it comes to the type of body that is depicted, is that it complies with dominant ideas about what makes a woman conventionally attractive. Naiko is young, white and toned, while simultaneously possessing the curves that are associated with the female body. Her medium long hair, conventionally considered to be feminine, is slightly wavy and worn down. She looks natural in the sense that she is not wearing extravagant makeup and there are no tattoos, piercings or other controversial body modifications visible. Take for instance image 2, in which the camera captures Naiko's flat stomach, slim limbs and firm breasts, or image 6, where the black-and-white filter emphasizes Naiko's whiteness. *Naiko* is centered around one person, one body, which limits the amount of diversity that is possible to display. Still, Prins is giving no recognition to marginalized women and those whose bodies have been deemed as less attractive than those of young, white, slim women. This lack of diversity when it comes to the representation of the sexual body is criticized within the sex positive movement, since due to the reinforcement of the Western beauty ideal, a wide variety of women is ignored (Fahs 273).

However, just because *Naiko* represents the conventionally attractive woman, it does not automatically mean that Naiko is fetishized. What does have a fetishizing effect, is the way in which her body is represented. In the previous section, I already discussed the objectifying qualities of the photographs that allow the spectator to get a good, uninterrupted look at the female body. Another aspect that fetishizes Naiko, is that her body seems to be flawless in every photograph. In all images, the lighting falls on her body in a way that seems to highlight the softness and smoothness of her skin. Apart from a few beauty marks, no elements are visible that are conventionally considered as imperfections, for instance, stretch marks, scars, acne or any other bump or blemish. Aside from the hair on Naiko's head and face, there is no trace of body hair to be found, not in her armpits or around her nipples, not around her belly button and genitalia or on her legs. The denial of natural bodily processes,

like menstruating and the growing of body hair, is something that sex positive feminists fight against. When it comes to the removal of body hair, those who decide not to do this are viewed as dirty, less sexually attractive, less intelligent, less relaxed and more aggressive, unpleasant and dominant, especially those who are already stigmatized (Fahs 280). Despite the removal of body hair being a personal choice, women still receive negative reactions when they decide not to remove it (Fahs 279). What Kuhn says about the representation of the physical appearance of women in glamour photography could be applied to *Naiko* as well, since the photo series seems to promote “(...) the ideal woman as being put together, composed of surfaces and defined by appearance (...)”, resulting in women being dehumanized and “(...) stripped of will and autonomy (...)” (Kuhn 14). Thus, the way in which *Naiko* is portrayed reinforces dominant ideas about what the perfect woman is supposed to look like. This ideal, however, is a state of fetishized perfection that not many women, if any, could ever achieve (Kuhn 13).

2.3 Sadism: Punishing Female Sexuality

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, sadism is explained as performed with the goal of punishing women for having the body of a flawed Other or for the embracing and acting upon their sexuality, often resulting in violence or death (Mulvey 348). So, is this type of sadism present in *Naiko*? I argue that it is not. To me, it does not look like *Naiko* is punished for being a woman or for embracing her sexuality. One could argue that the presence of kinbaku adds a sadistic dimension to this photo series, since the practice can be used to inflict pain for sexual pleasure on someone, for example by using so-called torture ties. Within kinbaku and other BDSM practices, however, one of the most important requirements is that whatever happens, happens consensually for all parties involved. The type of sadism that Mulvey describes has nothing to do with kinbaku, kink or BDSM, is not consensual and only results in pleasure for the person who is inflicting pain on an unwilling person.

If *Naiko* is not being punished, then how is her sexuality portrayed? Objectification and fetishization aside, I suggest that these photographs attempt to celebrate female sexuality. One obvious reason is their shameless depiction of kinbaku. Even though kinbaku has grown in popularity, kinbaku, along with other BDSM practices and kink in general, is still a taboo in wider society and has a lot of stigmas attached to it (Pennington 47). As mentioned before,

the sex positive movement aims towards the expansion of sexual rights, freedom, experimentation and ways of sexual expression (Fahs 272). To normalize, or at least create more understanding for practices like kinbaku, it is important that there are accurate and non-stigmatizing representations of it in art. Even though sexuality is still present in *Naiko*, with the photo series, Prins shows that kinbaku does not have to be put into a stigmatizing context. The absence of the rigger and therefore the absence of sexual tension and power relations between two or more people and the absence of stigmatizing objects like latex clothing and sex toys demonstrate that kinbaku can also be put into an artistic and almost museum-like context.

Another reason for *Naiko* attempting to celebrate female sexuality, is Naiko proudly displaying her mostly naked body, even though Naiko's nakedness can be interpreted in multiple ways. On the one hand, the objectifying qualities of the photographs turn her into an object that is there to be looked at, especially when the history of the depiction of the female nude in visual art is considered. The female nude has often been presented in a way that pleases the (for a long time mostly male) audience. Traditionally, the female nude is regarded as the "(...) project and possession of the male artist." (Sturken and Cartwright 123). This belief that dominant groups demand agency over less dominant groups is present in any relationship where there is an inequality of power. Sex positive feminists protest against this idea that men have the right to possess the female body and her sexuality, an idea that has been internalized by both men and women (Fahs 274). This taken-for-grantedness is also acknowledged by Mulvey, whose patriarchal male gaze deprives the object of the gaze from any autonomy. On the other hand, however, in this photo series, Naiko does not have to be an object that passively undergoes the voyeuristic gaze. One might argue that the exhibitionist qualities of the photographs cause Naiko to celebrate her nakedness and sexuality. She puts herself on display, which may bring a sense of pleasure to both Naiko and the female spectator who is looking for a depiction of kinbaku in particular and the liberation of female sexuality in general. Embracing and documenting one's nakedness, especially when the body is positioned in a context with a taboo practice, is like declaring pride for one's body and reclaiming the agency of one's body by not letting anyone else decide what to do with it.

Finally, it is time to pay attention to the photographs of the flowers (image 1, 3 and 5). The reason for these photographs to be part of my analysis of female sexuality, is because flowers symbolize many things, including eroticism and sexuality. One reason for this is the

comparison of a flower's reproductive system to that of a human (Taussig 118). Image 1, for instance, depicts the white and bright red petals of a fresh flower. In between the petals, four stamens of the flower are visible. This part of the flower, in which pollen are produced and spread, can in its function be compared to the male reproductive organs. When it comes to the symbolic meaning of colors, there is a contrast between the associations of the color white with purity and virginity and the color red with love, lust and sexuality. This could be interpreted as the dichotomy between the woman as either a virgin (white) or a whore (red) that sex positive feminists criticize (Fahs 280). An additional dimension of sensuality is added to the color red, for it returns in the lingerie that Naiko is wearing in image 2. Image 3 and 5 both feature dried flowers. Drying flowers can be done to prevent them from withering and to preserve their beauty, which can be connected to the beauty ideal of the female body as being young, as discussed in the previous section. To me, the juxtaposition of the flowers with the female nude indicates a celebration of female sexuality by drawing a comparison between the two. Generally, flowers and their sexual functions are regarded as natural, even beautiful, so the juxtaposition with the female nude can be interpreted as a recognition for the female body and its functions and desires as natural and beautiful as well.

Summary

As becomes clear from my analysis, there is not one way in which *Naiko* can be interpreted. When analyzed from the perspective of Mulvey's theory, the fragmentization, exhibitionism and fetishism put Naiko in a position in which she is objectified and reduced to a spectacle for voyeuristic pleasure. This interpretation, however, seems too oversimplified, since it does not consider the sex positive elements that the photo series contains. Even though the objectifying elements are not considered to be sex positive in the slightest, Prins does attempt to celebrate the (idealized) female body and female sexuality by portraying the female body as a work of art, associating women and their sexuality with the beauty of flowers and, essentially, giving a non-stigmatizing representation of kinbaku.

Conclusion

In this research, I analyzed the eight photographs of Lana Prins' photo series *Naiko*, that intrigued me due to their conflicting qualities. On the one hand, they appear to celebrate the female body and her sexuality, resulting in feelings of empowerment and liberation. On the other hand, they seem to objectify the female body through the male gaze that is not foreign to visual culture. To study whether the male gaze, as explained by Mulvey, is actually present in *Naiko* and to find a reason for my conflicting feelings, I decided to answer the following question: How are female sexuality and the female body represented in the photo series *Naiko* by Lana Prins, when looked at the eight photographs from a feminist and sex positive perspective and with special attention to Laura Mulvey's notion of the male gaze? As indicated in the introduction of this research, the answer to this question consists of my interpretation of the representation of the female body and female sexuality within *Naiko*, based on Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and my own analysis of the photographs.

Through my analysis, I found that my conflicting feelings are indeed caused by the decisions that Prins made for this photo series. There are multiple elements that indicate her trying to make the female body and female sexuality more discussable, as she mentions on her website, like the female nude in juxtaposition to the flowers, symbolizing beauty and sexuality, and the non-stigmatizing depiction of *Naiko* in a context that is largely considered to be a taboo. Whether Prins actually succeeds in presenting a photo series that celebrates and embraces the female body and female sexuality is highly challenged by my analysis. Before performing my analysis, I did not realize how many photographic tools she uses that objectify, fetishize and dehumanize the white, young, slim female body and marginalize those whose bodies do not fall into this category: the framing of the photographs fragmentizes the female body and excludes *Naiko*'s gaze, preventing her to look back at the spectator and making the voyeuristic gaze more accessible to apply; the exhibitionist way in which *Naiko* is positioned within an empty environment showcases her body and invites the spectator to get a good look at her body; the lighting and lack of imperfections on *Naiko*'s body creates the image of the ideal female, which is a fantastical, unrealistic and hardly achievable representation of women that matches the idea that women are carriers instead of

creators of meaning. The objectification and fetishizing of the female body and the lack of diversity are not in the slightest sex positive, so what Prins, to me, seems to be most successful in, is in providing an, in the eyes of the mainstream, non-stereotypical representation of kinbaku, for it does not contain those elements that the practice is stigmatized for.

When it comes to the method, the most difficult part was deciding how to divide the photo series and how to connect as many aspects of Mulvey's theory as possible to those different parts of the analysis. Before dividing my analysis according to some aspects of Mulvey's theory (objectification, fetishism and sadism), I made a distinction between one chapter about the representation of the female body and one about the representation of female sexuality. This, however, had to be rearranged, since it was difficult to connect the chapter on female sexuality to Mulvey's theory. When it comes to the theoretical framework, even though Mulvey's theory is quite complex and perhaps outdated, I found that her theory on the male gaze functions as a good base for my research. Mulvey herself already provides a starting point for the analyzing of visual culture by applying her theory to the representation of women in film. However, like other critics, I do not agree with all of the claims that she makes, especially those having to do with the dichotomy within voyeurism and the role of the female spectator, as discussed in chapter one. Therefore, it was necessary to expand her theory with the suggestions of Kuhn.

Since representations of women are everywhere in contemporary visual culture, there are infinite possibilities of performing further research. More close readings could be done on representations, the amount of diversity and the attitude towards sexuality in the work of other photographers who claim to be sex positive feminists, like Petra Collins and Maisie Cousins, to see whether they are comparable to Prins in their approach. Another option is to zoom in on the dichotomy between masculine versus feminine within the gaze in photography, since this black-and-white distinction that Mulvey used resulted in a fair amount of criticism. It would also be interesting to analyze the representations and amount of sex positivity in explicitly non-heteronormative photographs, since *Naiko* could be appealing to a queer audience, but is not presented that way. Similar to Mulvey stating that she still enjoys Hollywood melodrama, I still enjoy the photographs that Prins creates. That being said, it would be ideal if the guilt that I experience from liking these photographs could be replaced by an actual feeling of the celebration of women and their sexuality, including those

women who are older, bigger, darker, not traditionally feminine, involved in stigmatized activities or any other category of under-represented women. I hope that my research adds to the list of critical feminist readings on visual culture to create more awareness about the representation of human bodies and sexuality and to eventually generate positive, tangible results in everyday life.

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VII. Attachments



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5



Image 6



Image 7



Image 8