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Seeing Others as Objects: Perceptual Objectification & Affordances

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Abstract

In discussions of objectification, the use of visual language is ubiquitous. It is striking that the literature often talks about *treating* and *seeing* someone as an object in the same breath. Yet accounts of objectification focus on objectifying *treatment* and leave the notion of objectifying *perception* unexplained. This prompts the question of our paper: *what does it mean to see someone as an object?* Our aim in this paper is to develop an affordance-based account of perceptual objectification. Put simply, affordances are the *possibilities for action* in an agent's environment. To perceptually objectify someone is a matter of perceiving the object-related affordances they present as opposed to their person-related affordances. We argue that this account explains the close connection between seeing and treating someone as an object.

1 | PERCEPTUAL OBJECTIFICATION

Consider the following episode described by Bartky:

> A young woman was recently interviewed for a teaching job in philosophy by the academic chairman of a large department. During most of the interview, so she reported, the man stared fixedly at her breasts. In this situation, the woman is a bosom, not a job candidate. Was this department chairman guilty only of a confusion between business and pleasure? Scarcely. He stares at her breasts for his sake, not hers. Her wants and needs not only play no role in the encounter but, because of the

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> direction of his attention, she is discomfited, feels humiliated, and performs badly. Not surprisingly, she fails to get the job. (Bartky 1990: 27)

Bartky suggests that what the woman experienced was being perceptually sexually objectified: "One way to be sexually objectified, then, is to be the object of a kind of perception, unwelcome and inappropriate…." (ibid) Bartky also highlights the harms of being perceptually objectified: the experience is not only humiliating to the woman – it also costs her the job.

As Bartky describes it, the objectification happens in virtue of a kind of perception. She is not alone in thinking that there is such a phenomenon as perceptual objectification. Indeed, in discussions of objectification the use of visual language is ubiquitous. Here are some examples from the feminist literature:

> 'the *seeing* and/or *treating* of someone as an object' (Nussbaum 1995: 251, *our emphasis*)

> 'A man, for example, who objectifies women will *view them and treat them* as having a nature which makes them what he desires them to be…' (Haslanger 2012: 73, *our emphasis*)

> 'The most subtle and deniable way sexualized evaluation is enacted – and arguably the most ubiquitous – *is through gaze, or visual inspection of the body …. when objectified, women are treated as bodies* – and in particular, as bodies that exist for the use and pleasure of others.' (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 175, *our emphasis*)

It is striking that the literature often talks about *treating* and *seeing* someone as an object in the same breath. Now of course talk of *seeing* things a particular way is not always strictly perceptual. For example, if I say '*I see what you mean*' I report that I *understand* your meaning but not that I *visually experience* your meaning. But in cases such as Bartky's the talk of seeing someone as an object does *not* seem to be merely metaphorical.

At the same time accounts of objectification leave the notion of objectifying *perception* unexplained. They focus on objectifying *treatment*. This prompts the question of our paper:

> **The Perceptual Question:** What does it mean to see someone as an object?

Our aim in this paper is to answer this question by developing an account of perceptual objectification using the notion of affordances. Put simply, affordances are the *possibilities for action* in an agent's environment. An apple may afford eating, juggling, or touching. J. Gibson (1979) who coined the term 'affordance' argued that they are *perceptible*. Recently, a number of philosophers of perception have defended the claim that affordances are part of our perceptual experience.[1] We argue that, *qua* embodied beings, humans give rise to different kinds of affordances: person- and object-related affordances. A person may afford dancing with, greeting, conversing with. She can also afford touching, cutting, climbing on. We argue that to perceptually objectify someone is a matter of perceiving the object-related affordances they present as opposed to their person-related affordances. We argue that this account explains the close connection between seeing and treating someone as a person because the affordances perceived are themselves potential ways of treating someone.

Our broader aim is to shed light on what you might call the *moral psychology* of objectification. By elucidating the perceptual dimension of objectification, we can better capture what goes on in the mind of the objectifier. This has implications for how we *explain* why objectification occurs, for how we apportion *blame* for objectification and for how we might more effectively *resist* it in the future. So besides its theoretical value, our proposal promises to have some important practical ramifications.

Here's a roadmap. We start by extracting some lessons from the literature on objectification in Section 2. This inspires our own affordance-based account of perceptual objectification. Section 3 introduces affordance

perception – our perception of possibilities for action which includes the action-opportunities presented by other people. Section 4 offers our account of perceptual objectification and Sections 5 and 6 put it to work across various contexts.

1.1 | Objectification

The aim of this section is to map out the phenomenon that an account of perceptual objectification needs to capture. It argues that perceptual objectification is a distinctive way to objectify someone that can occur even in the absence of overt objectifying treatment.

The concept of objectification plays an especially prominent role in feminist theorising (Papadaki, 2024). Catherine MacKinnon claims '[a]ll women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water' and proposes that such objectification 'is definitive and synonymous with women's lives as gender female' (1989: 124). At the core of objectification lies the phenomenon of one person treating another *as an object*. What exactly it means to treat a person as a mere thing is hard to articulate. The most promising route is to follow thinkers like Nussbaum and Langton in regarding objectification as a cluster concept. The following list comprises seven key features of objectification identified by Nussbaum (1995: 257) plus three more later added by Langton (2009: 228–229):

1. Instrumentality: the treatment of a person as a tool for the objectifier's purposes;

2. Denial of autonomy: the treatment of a person as lacking in autonomy and self-determination;

3. Inertness: the treatment of a person as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity;

4. Fungibility: the treatment of a person as interchangeable with other objects;

5. Violability: the treatment of a person as lacking in boundary-integrity;

6. Ownership: the treatment of a person as something that is owned by another (can be bought or sold);

7. Denial of subjectivity: the treatment of a person as something whose experiences and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.

8. Reduction to body: the treatment of a person as identified with their body, or body parts;

9. Reduction to appearance: the treatment of a person primarily in terms of how they look, or how they appear to the senses;

10. Silencing: the treatment of a person as if they are silent, lacking the capacity to speak.

This list of inter-connected features helps characterise the phenomenon without falling into the trap of trying to give necessary and sufficient conditions of objectification (Bauer: 2015). Each item on the list highlights a way of *treating* someone as an object.

But it is possible to experience objectification even in the absence of any overt treatment. Charges of objectification often arise in the context of *visual representations* of women. In cases like this, the objectifier themselves is off-stage. Instead, there is something about the way the image *looks*, and perhaps how it invites the viewer to look

at it, that constitutes objectification. Bauer offers several vivid examples of sexually objectifying images of women including this advert:

> An advertisement for Lynx Shower Gel featuring a mud-smeared woman in a teeny bikini, depicted head-on from her mid-thighs to just above her breasts, looking as though she is just about to pull the lower part of the garment off with her thumbs, the words "Wash me" drawn (presumably with a finger) on her belly (2015: 29)

A more recent example is an advert for weight loss supplements (Fig. 1) on the London Underground that caused such a controversy that it was banned.[2]

Again, these cases are a long way from one person *treating* another as an object in their interactions. Yet there is something about how these images *look* (or perhaps how they are *meant* to look) that plausibly objectifies the women depicted.

Perceptual objectification without objectifying treatment seems to also occur in the context of *self*-objectification. Consider this passage from Bartky:

> Now, sexual objectification typically involves two persons, one who objectifies and one who is objectified. But objectifier and objectified can be one and the same person: A woman can become a sex object for herself, taking toward her own person the attitude of the man. She will then take erotic satisfaction in her physical self, reveling in her body *as a beautiful object to be gazed at and decorated* (Bartky: 1990 36-37, *our emphasis*)

When describing the experience of being treated as an object, visual language is used to capture the *phenomenology* of being objectified: what it is like to be objectified. The feeling of being *looked at*, *inspected* or *ogled* is an important part of the experience of objectification (see Frederikson and Roberts 1997: 175). The 'male gaze' is something that is something palpably felt by those who fall under it. In the article that coined the term 'male gaze', Mulvey (1975)



FIGURE 1 Protein World 'Beach Body Ready' Advert.

describes the 'controlling' power of the gaze and highlights its oppressive power. This phenomenology can be present in the absence of overt treatment. Suppose your friend tells you about a discomfiting meeting in which she felt that her business partner, despite being perfectly civil and behaving impeccably, looked at her "like a piece of meat". The experience your friend recounts is one of objectification and perception seems to be at the heart of it.

Thus there can be cases of perceptual objectification that do not involve any objectifying treatment. This motivates the need for an account of perceptual objectification.

It is also important for an account of perceptual objectification not to be limited to the *sexual* objectification of *women* by men. Objectification is a broader phenomenon that is neither essentially sexual nor essentially gendered. For example, there is a growing literature on the sexual objectification of *men*.[3] And greater attention is being paid to the distinctive ways in which *trans* bodies are objectified (Anzani et al. 2021) and to patterns of objectification in *queer* communities (e.g. Engeln-Maddox et al. 2011). In all of these contexts talk of *seeing* people as objects is again ubiquitous.

Non-sexual forms of objectification are also thought to occur in a variety of contexts. The objectification of members of minoritised races is an important theme in race theory. Charles Johnson offers the following account of an experience he had as a black student in 1970s New York:

> I walk down the hallway at the university and pass a professor I know well. He glances up quickly, yet does not acknowledge that he knows me. He has seen a black, a body, that remains for him always in the background, seldom figured forth save as maid, taxi driver, or janitor. Passing, he sees me as he sees the fire extinguisher to my left, that chair outside the door. I have been seen, yet not seen… (Johnson 1993: 604)[4]

Notice again the visual language in this passage: it describes not just how the professor treats Johnson but how he *sees* him.

Although the cases considered so far are all morally problematic, an account of perceptual objectification should also be able to accommodate cases that are morally neutral. In medical contexts, for example, medical practitioners may treat patients as objects and patients may treat themselves the same way (Grīnfelde 2023). Under the right circumstances, such objectification seems to be morally unproblematic. And we again find that such objectification is thought to have a perceptual dimension. Consider Foucault's influential concept of the 'medical gaze' (1989) which is a way of *looking* at a patient as a kind of object.

2 | LESSONS FROM THE LITERATURE

This section surveys existing accounts of perceptual objectification that have either been defended or suggested by the literature on objectification.

A key difference between a subject and a mere object is that subjects have minds and objects do not. A common theme in the literature is that objectification involves denying, or otherwise failing to respect, the *mindedness* of a subject. If we follow this line of thought through, what would it mean for *perceptual* objectification? It might encourage a particular way of dividing up a person's properties. A person's object-related properties are their *bodily* properties and their subject-related properties are their *mental* properties. To see someone *as an object* is to see them in a way that is skewed toward that person's bodily properties and away from their mental properties. Stock offers an account along these lines:

> …seeing-a-person-as-a-body…simultaneously involves (a) attention towards bodily and other physical characteristics and (b) attention away from 'minded features'. One's attention is heavily focused upon bodily features, understood in terms of such properties as colour, shape, texture, line, weight, and

> aesthetic qualities; and not at all, or in a relatively reduced way, on evidence of mental life or personality. (2018: 303)[5]

The idea of perception being skewed towards some properties at the expense of others is naturally unpacked in terms of *salience*. Something is perceptually salient to the extent that it is *foregrounded* in perceptual experience, thus the objectifier's perception gives undue salience to someone's bodily properties over their mental properties.[6] This resonates well with broader ideas about the link between objectification and salience. Thinking about objectification in both perceptual and non-perceptual forms, Whiteley introduces the notion of 'harmful salience perspectives' and argues that '[m]aking an individual's thing-like properties more salient than their personhood-related properties is a form of objectification.' (2022: 16).

This kind of approach has some initial promise of meeting several of the requirements identified in the last section. First, it offers a flexible account of the *normativity* of objectification. It is clear that failure to perceive someone's mindedness could be morally problematic but equally clear that in some cases, such as a medical examination, it can happen harmlessly (Stock 2018: 307). Second, it suggests an intuitive link between objectifying perception and *objectifying images*. Images can emphasise – i.e. make salient – a person's bodily properties at the expense of mental properties (Whiteley 2022: 2). Furthermore, engaging with such images plausibly disposes the viewer to find the same properties salient when they see someone in person (Stock 2018: 302).

However, this approach also has some limitations. The first problem is that objectification needn't involve denying, or otherwise obscuring, the mindedness of a subject. Consider the objectifier who sees a woman as *wanting* to be ogled. This is very plausibly a case of perceptual objectification, yet the property of the woman that is being perceptually represented is not a bodily property but a *mental* property. This counter-example reflects a deeper problem with the approach: its tacit commitment to a mind–body dualism. Material feminists, in particular, would balk at conflating objectification with focus on the body, precisely because they are suspicious of any mind–body dualism. As Keller notes:

> What characterizes material feminists' emphasis on one's body is that they thereby mean an "active, viable and autonomous body" - as opposed to an "enslaved, used, or forced body." This body deserves recognition. It is precisely these characteristics of bodies as alive, autonomous, with subjective feelings and emotions that objectification harms or denies - and that feminists working on the topic object to. Critiques of objectification do not rank minds over bodies; they rank living, autonomous human beings (with both mind and body) over innate objects or nonautonomous instruments. (Keller 2021: 33)

The idea that objectifying perception is skewed towards seeing some things at the expense of others is a promising one. But it looks like a mistake to unpack this in terms of a skew toward *bodily* properties over *mental* properties.[7]

A second, related, problem is that this approach doesn't seem to yield the required link between *seeing* someone as an object and *treating* them as an object. Consider the various kinds of objectifying behaviour highlighted on Nussbaum and Langton's list. Why would attending more to a person's colour, shape, texture, line, weight and aesthetic qualities make you more likely to treat them in an objectifying way? It seems perfectly possible for someone to find such properties salient without being in any way disposed to treat them in an objectifying way. Conversely, and in line with the first problem above, it is quite possible to find someone's mental properties salient but in a way that disposes you to treat them as an object. If objectifying perception promotes objectifying behaviour, then seeing someone as an object must involve *more* than paying undue attention to their bodily features.

Perhaps the best way to get the required link between how someone is seen and how they are treated is to build ways of treating a person *into* the perception. Langton uses language that pushes in this direction when she writes of women being seen as 'something to be looked at, to be pursued, to be consumed, to be used, to be possessed.' (Langton 2009: 331) This gerundive locution of seeing someone as '*to be φ-ed*' is very suggestive. It has its roots in

P.F. Strawson's influential work on the 'objective attitude' (1962). Strawson was not concerned with the phenomenon of *objectification* and considered relatively benign cases such as seeing someone as to be handled, to be trained etc. But if we slot *objectifying* actions into this schema we get Langton's more ominous cases. Other feminists have used the same locution to describe the objectifying gaze. Consider the Bartky passage, quoted in Section 1, in which the self-objectifier revels in her body 'as a beautiful object *to be gazed at* and decorated.' (Bartky 1990: 36–37, *our emphasis*).

The first thing to note here is the direct link between a way of seeing someone and a way of treating them. If the objectifier sees someone as *to-be-pursued* this would help explain why they engage in pursuing behaviour. More generally, seeing someone as *to be φ-ed* can causally contribute to the perceiver actually *φ*-ing. This contrasts sharply with the first approach discussed. Finding someone's bodily properties salient needn't motivate objectifying behaviour, and where it does contribute to such behaviour there would need to be mediating mental states that do much of the explanatory work.

Another thing to note is that there is no tacit commitment to a mind–body dualism. We can hold on to the idea that the perceptions of the objectifier are skewed towards some things at the expense of others. But it is not that they are skewed towards perceiving bodily properties at the expense of mental properties. Rather, they are skewed towards perceiving ways of treating them as an object rather than ways of treating them as a person.

This approach seems to be on the right track, but it does leave us with more work to do. What exactly does it mean to see someone as *to-be-φ-ed*? And is it plausible that ways of treating people are part of visual experience? Remember, we are not concerned here with 'seeing' in the figurative sense of merely *regarding* someone as *to-be-φ-ed*. We are concerned with the contents of visual experience. To answer these questions, we can take our cue from Brancazio:

> The perpetrator views the harassed person as a relevant *affordance*, not for a social interaction but for objectification (dehumanization, denial of agency, being treated as a means to an end, and so on). (2020: 9, *our emphasis*)

Here Brancazio invokes the all-important concept of affordances for action. Although we will diverge from Brancazio's specific suggestion, our aim is to develop the idea that perceptual objectification is linked to affordances for objectifying action. Before that, we will explore the concept of affordances in more detail.

3 | AFFORDANCES AND AFFORDANCE PERCEPTION

The concept of affordances was introduced by psychologist J. Gibson in the 1960s. Put simply, affordances are the *possibilities for action* in an agent's environment. Thus a biscuit might afford eating, a ball might afford catching and a tree might afford climbing. Affordances are normally designated with the '*φ*-able' locution where '*φ*' is some afforded action. The biscuit is then *edible*, the ball *catchable* and the tree *climbable*. Crucially, affordances are agent-relative so the same environment can afford different things for different people. They are relative to the agent's *situation*, so a ball whizzing across the park might afford catching to someone in the ball's path but not for someone further away. Actions are also afforded relative to an agent's *abilities*, so a tree that is climbable for someone with the right skills might be unclimbable for someone without those skills. The actions afforded to you are thus the actions that are possible for you right now given your position in an environment and your abilities.

J. Gibson's most important claim was that such affordances are *perceptible* (1979). You can literally *see* a biscuit as edible or, more precisely, as *edible-by-you-here-and-now*. This is not to say that you perceive *all* of the affordances that your environment offers. Any environment offers what Rietveld & Kiverstein call 'a rich landscape of affordances' (2014: 325) in which innumerable possibilities for action are available. However, what the subject perceives is a more selective *field* of affordances. A range of factors determine which affordances an agent perceives

including the agent's current task, their habits, their emotions and a whole host of societal influences.[8] Sometimes these possibilities for action are presented to the agent in a way that *motivates* them to act. You might perceive the biscuit as something that *could* be eaten but more often you perceive it as positively *calling out* to be eaten. This is what is known as a *soliciting* affordance (Siegel 2014).[9]

The affordances discussed in the literature are predominantly opportunities for causal manipulation of objects mediated by bodily action, such as a pram being pushable, a weight being liftable and a fluffy rug being touchable. Call those *object-related* affordances. As embodied beings, people also present affordances for causal manipulation in much the same way as objects. Just as an object in your path can afford pushing aside, a person in your path can afford the same action. A toddler can perceive their mother as climbable in much the same way as they perceive the sofa as climbable. Sometimes these affordances might belong to specific *parts* of a person, such as seeing someone's hair as touchable.

But people also present us with a different kind of possibility: not just for manipulation but for engagement – as Brancazio puts it '…opportunities for interaction with another agent' (2020: 4) Consider the following examples from Rietveld et al.:

> The sight of a sad friend affords consoling him or her, a colleague at the coffee machine solicits small talk, and an extended hand immediately prepares the body for shaking it (Rietveld et al. 2013: 436, quoted Brancazio 2020: 8)

Depending on the context, another person might afford *rowing with*, *playing with* or *moving a sofa with*. Any list of examples will barely scratch the surface of interpersonal affordances, which J. Gibson himself describes as 'the richest and most elaborate affordances of the environment' (1979: 135).[10] Let's call affordances that present us with possibilities for interaction and engagement with agents as *person-related affordances*.

This distinction between *object-related* and *person-related* affordances is not intended to be sharp or exhaustive. Consider, for example, a robber affording *running away from*. Is the act of running away premised on the robber being an object? We can run away from an avalanche. But more commonly we run away from agents. You are running away from a *chaser* and chasing is an exercise of agency. But is this affordance an opportunity for *interaction* or *engagement?* It would seem not. Running away from someone isn't an action you do *with* the robber so is quite unlike communicating and coordinating with someone. So perhaps affording running away from is an affordance that is neither object-related *nor* person-related. Perhaps it could be described as agent-related, where being an agent is more demanding than being an object but less demanding than being a person.

Regardless of how we carve them up, it is clear that other people present us with a vast range of affordances. Just as with object-related affordances, we will only ever perceive a select sub-set of person-related affordances. This gives us the tools to better characterise one person's perception of another. What *person-related* affordances do they perceive the other person as having? Which of those affordances *solicit* action and to what extent? And why do they perceive those affordances (and those solicitations) rather than others?

4 | AFFORDANCES AND PERCEPTUAL OBJECTIFICATION

Recall our starting question:

> **The Perceptual Question:** What does it mean to see someone as an object?

With the notion of affordances on the table, a first pass at our proposal is that perceptually objectifying someone is a matter of perceiving the object-related affordances they present as opposed to their person-related affordances.

Let us spell this out in more detail before applying it in the feminist context in the following sections. Objectification is about perceiving object-related affordances. As we have seen, object-related affordances are affordances for specific actions that are afforded by objects. You see a chair as affording sitting on, standing on, climbing underneath, moving around, dusting. If those are the affordances you see when looking at a person, you see object-related affordances in relation to that person. This is an instance of perceptual objectification (albeit a slightly bizarre one).

Recall Brancazio's suggestion for what constitutes perceptual objectification:

> The perpetrator views the harassed person as a relevant affordance, not for a social interaction but for objectification (dehumanization, denial of agency, being treated as a means to an end, and so on). (Brancazio 2020: 9)

We embrace the spirit of this suggestion. We objectify others by seeing them in certain ways: by seeing them as touchable, squeezable, discardable, punchable. Perceptual objectification involves seeing the other person as affording actions that constitute objectification (or dehumanisation, etc.). But we do not think it's plausible that the objectifier sees an affordance for "objectification" under that description – indeed, it is plausible that many objectifiers may well lack the concept of objectification altogether. Still, insofar as they see others as affording treatment that is, as a matter of fact, objectifying, we can say that they see them as affording objectification.

The first pass of our proposal says that perceptual objectification is a matter of seeing object-related as opposed to person-related affordances with respect to someone. How are we to understand the "as opposed to"? Here is a difficulty: when we look at our environment, we perceive many affordances at once – including many affordances pertaining to an individual object. The same, presumably, is true of our perception of affordances that pertain to persons. Imagine you are talking to your bodybuilding friend, who has developed some awe-inspiring, unreal-looking biceps since you last saw her. Talking to her you perceive a full range of affordances. Many of them are person-related: you see her as affording conversation, joking around, hugging, confiding in. But you also perceive some object-related affordances: in particular, her bulging biceps look to you touchable. Are you perceptually objectifying your friend in this situation? And in general, what are we to say about situations in which we perceive a mixed bag of person-related and object-related affordances with respect to someone?

Whether such cases amount to perceptual objectification or not depends on how salient the object-related affordances are compared to the person-related affordances. An affordance is salient when it is prioritised in experience relative to other affordances.[11] So, the mere fact that you are perceiving your friend's biceps as touchable may not be enough to constitute perceptual objectification as long as that affordance does not take priority over all the other person-related affordances that you are also perceiving. Importantly, this is something that is at least partially up to you. We can promote one affordance relative to another by focusing our attention on it. Even if you find yourself captivated by the biceps, you do not need to dwell on it. You can direct your attention back to all the other affordances your friend admits.

Something similar seems plausible in the standard cases of perceptual objectification discussed in the feminist literature. Simply noticing someone's curly hair and seeing it as affording touching does not quite seem to be enough for perceptual objectification, unless this object-related affordance dominates and crowds out other person-related affordances, such as the affordance to joke around with, to gossip with, to walk together with.[12]

This helps us refine our proposal: to perceptually objectify someone involves perceiving object-related affordances in relation to them that are more salient than their person-related affordances. It is a matter of both perceiving object-related affordance and those object-related affordances being more prominent in one's experience.

We have said that whether an affordance is salient is, at least partly, up to you and how you direct your attention. But there is more to say here. Some affordances are more likely to be salient than others. Recall soliciting affordances. Those are affordances that exert motivational pull – you perceive the biscuit not just as edible but as calling out to be eaten and you may have to exert self-control to stop yourself from eating it. Plausibly, soliciting affordances will be more likely to be salient than non-soliciting affordances precisely because they exert motivational

pull. The edibility of the biscuit is thus more prominent in your visual experience than the edibility of the unappetising carrot-stick.

Thus, if you perceive a soliciting affordance in relation to your friend's biceps – you perceive it not merely as touchable but as *calling* for touching – this affordance is more likely to dominate over the other affordances you perceive. Soliciting affordances – because they engage our motivation – tend to be more prominent than non-soliciting ones. This means that someone who is more likely to perceive a person's object-related affordances as soliciting is also more likely to perceptually objectify. But this isn't a forgone conclusion.

This discussion brings into focus another aspect of perceptual objectification. Perceptual experience typically unfolds over time. Talking to your friend, your attention may momentarily be captivated by the biceps-touching affordance only to settle back on the squarely person-related ones. Perceptual experiences, including perceptual objectifying experiences, are ephemeral.

It is for this reason that feminists focus on the *objectifying gaze*, not token objectifying experiences. The objectifying gaze is a *way of looking* and that way of looking shapes the affordances that you perceive (and don't perceive) when you see someone. We can then say that the objectifying gaze is an *attunement to object-related affordances in relation to people*. Such attunement *disposes* the perceiver to perceive object-related affordances in relation to a person and to find those affordances more salient.

The visual experience of someone adopting this gaze won't merely be characterized by momentary perceptions of another's object-related affordances. Rather, there will be a sustained pattern of such affordances being more prominent in their experience than the person-related affordances that are also available. The objectifying gaze is thus compatible with also perceiving person-related affordances in relation to a person. It's just that those person-related affordances tend to be less salient. And when they are salient, the perceptual experience tends not to persist.[13] We can think of our affordance perception as a map of action-possibilities in our environment. To have an objectifying gaze is to have a map that is systematically skewed in one direction – it highlights object-related affordances in relation to people, as opposed to person-related affordances.

In this section, we have put on the table our account of perceptual objectification and the objectifying gaze. In the next section, we will draw out two virtues of our account.

5 | SEEING AND TREATING AS OBJECTS

Our account says that the objectifying gaze is an attunement to object-related affordances in relation to people. Let's see how well this captures the central concerns of feminist philosophers when they talk about the objectifying gaze.

Recall the visual allusions that are a common thread of describing the objectifying gaze:

> 'the *seeing and/or treating* of someone as an object (Nussbaum 1995: 251, our emphasis)

> 'A man, for example, who objectifies women will *view them and treat them* as having a nature which makes them what he desires them to be…' (Haslanger 2012: 73, our emphasis)

Our account vindicates the use of visual language here – it licenses removing the air quotes around "seeing" and "gaze". Seeing someone as an object is a matter of seeing object-related affordances and those affordances being salient. The objectifying gaze is quite literally a gaze in the sense that it is a *perceptual* attunement to a specific range of affordances when interacting with another person. The objectifying gaze is a matter of seeing women as objects in the sense that it involves looking at women and seeing object-related action-possibilities that they afford.

This means that the account also vindicates the close link between "seeing" and "treating". It can be literally true that "men treat women as men see women" for men see women as affording objectifying treatment. Just as one

might see certain action possibilities when looking at a couch (sitting, lounging, napping), the objectifier sees certain action possibilities – namely, possibilities for objectifying treatment – when looking at women.

This link between perceptual objectification and objectifying treatment is not mere correlation; it is explanatory. Men treat women as objects *because* men see women as objects. Our account of the objectifying gaze sheds light on this explanatory connection.

First, affordance perception has motivational force by filtering your options for action. Perceived affordances are inputs into our deliberations about what to do. When deliberating about what to do, you are more likely to consider action possibilities that you perceive than those that you do not perceive, and you are more likely to consider action possibilities that are salient to you than those that are not. A systematically skewed "map" of action possibilities in relation to women will thus manifest in a skewed deliberative process. Being attuned to action possibilities for objectifying action thus makes it more likely that an agent will consider acting in an objectifying way.

The link between affordance perception and action is not always mediated by deliberation. We have seen that some affordances are soliciting – they exert direct motivational pull. We experience the affordance as calling out to be acted upon. Soliciting affordances prime us for action and they can lead us to act in a way that bypasses both desire and belief.[14] Think about how you "automatically" move in to support someone next to you who has stumbled – the experience here is one of seeing the other person as calling to be propped up even before you have formed any desire or belief about how to do it. Or think about how you "automatically" step back from someone who stands too close. In this case, you may lack explicit beliefs about what the "correct" distance is to keep to someone, given the relevant cultural context (Dreyfus 2002). You simply perceive the situation as one calling for creating greater distance. Soliciting affordances can thus directly lead to action – indeed, it can take effort to not act on a soliciting affordance. Thus, for the objectifier who perceives someone as soliciting an objectifying action, their perception motivates them to perform that very action.

Looking – directing our gaze – is one type of action that seems particularly liable to be performed without the mediation of deliberation and that often seems to bypass any desire to look. Consider how we "catch ourselves looking" at something, how our gaze can "be drawn to something" (despite ourselves). Looking is very often responsive simply to affordances – things in our perceptual field "call out" to be looked at.

By directing where to look, we can also influence which other affordances are present in our visual experience. Consider locutions such as "he undressed her with his eyes", ogling, leering. These locutions all imply that there is more going on here than where one looks: the looking is laden with action possibilities. Our account easily makes sense of them. The direction and quality of someone's gaze gives clues as to which affordances are salient to them. Someone who is "leering" isn't merely staring: they are looking and perceiving soliciting affordances to touch or grope. Someone who is "undressing with his eyes" is not merely looking at someone's body but perceiving undressing-related affordances. And the constancy of the stare suggests that the objectifying action possibility is not merely momentarily, fleetingly perceived but that the objectifier dwells on it. At the same time, the direction of someone's gaze gives us clues about which affordances the objectifier is not perceiving. Someone staring at a woman's breasts is unlikely to perceive the affordance to discuss a math problem with her.

We have said that looking is an action that lends itself to be guided directly by soliciting affordances. But this doesn't mean that looking is something one cannot help but do. Soliciting affordances prime us for action – they do not determine action. We can resist soliciting affordances. Typically this takes some effort. We consciously redirect our gaze, we can resist letting it wander. Effortful resistance of soliciting affordances can compromise one's ability to do other things, Thus soliciting affordances for objectifying actions can extract a price even when they are not acted upon.

Finally, our proposal can account for the phenomenon of perceptual self-objectification. In describing self-objectification, feminist philosophers typically reach for perceptual terms: self-objectification involves the "internalised male gaze".

Just as we can see others affording certain actions – person-related or object-related – so we can see action-possibilities in relation to ourselves. You perceptually self-objectify when you perceive action possibilities for

objectifying actions in relation to yourself and when those action possibilities are salient to you. To have internalised the objectifying gaze is partly a matter of being attuned to affordances for self-objectifying actions. The mechanism of perceptual self-objectification is thus the same as for third-personal perceptual objectification. The challenge that remains for an account of self-objectification is to set out which actions constitute self-objectification and what characterises them. While we cannot do justice to the topic of self-objectification, we can note some promising applications. Consider Bartky:

> In contemporary patriarchal culture, a male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: They stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other. (Bartky 1990: 72).

We can put this in terms of seeing what one's body affords for others: to see one's lips as "kissable" (*ibid*.: 71). Or, to put it more in the spirit of MacKinnon: it is to see one's body as affording "fucking" for someone else.

At this stage it is worth considering a potential objection to our account. We have proposed that perceptual objectification relies on the distinction between object- and person-related affordances: to perceptually objectify someone involves perceiving object-related affordances in relation to them that are more salient than person-related affordances. But you may worry that this fails to do justice to an important form of perceptual objectification, which requires person-related affordances. Thus, consider a man looking at a woman and seeing her as rape-able. Or a professor talking to a woman graduate student and seeing her as affording asking out on a date or complimenting on her weight loss. These, you might argue, are cases of perceptual objectification. Yet they depend on the perception of person-related affordances: it's impossible to rape or date or pay a compliment to an object.

Let's think about seeing someone as affording dating or as affording complimenting first. Such perceptions are problematic. Insofar as they are problematic, this is a result of the relevant actions being morally problematic. You shouldn't date your graduate student and you should not comment on your graduate student's (or other people's!) weight. But it is not clear to us that those perceptions are inherently *objectifying*. Why do they strike some as objectifying? The important explanation is that the perception of these particular person-related affordances often correlates with perception of object-related affordances that pertain to their bodies. Indeed perception of these object-related affordances – seeing an overweight body as something to be squeezed, to be shrunk, to be looked at – may explain the person-related affordance.

But what about seeing someone as affording *raping*? This case is special in that it involves not just a person-related affordance but one that picks out an action that violates that person's autonomy. Langton has argued that violating someone's autonomy is precisely a way of objectifying them. We can objectify others by attributing autonomy to them specifically to deny it:

> Another kind of example relevant to feminist work might be sadistic rape, by which I mean rape where non-consent is actively sought, rather than disregarded or ignored. In this sort of case, it's not that he doesn't *listen* to her saying 'no' – he *wants* her to say 'no'. Here there is violation of a woman's autonomy committed by someone who affirms her autonomy, attributes to her a capacity for choice, and desires precisely to overcome that choice, making her do what she chooses not to do. In sadistic rape, someone is 'treated as an object' in part by attributing autonomy to them in one way – so that autonomy can be denied a different way. A certain kind of autonomy-affirmation is thus a necessary feature of this way of treating as an object. (Langton 2009: 234).

There are two ways we can respond here.

If we agree that autonomy-violating actions are forms of objectification, then the account of perceptual objectification that we have presented so far is incomplete. It only captures a narrower range of perceptual objectification – namely, the perceptual objectification that corresponds to treating the other person as lacking autonomy.

However, note that this can be easily remedied by extending the account. We could say that perceptual objectification is to perceive either object-related affordances or person-related affordances involving autonomy-violating actions in relation to them that are more salient than (non-autonomy violating) person-related affordances.

This is if we agree with Langton that autonomy-violating actions are to be counted as instances of objectification. But should we? In her recent book on gaslighting, Kate Abramson argues that the concept "gaslighting" has suffered from getting more and more extended:

> [gaslighting] refers sometimes to a quite wide array of ways in which one person might relate to another, while at other times to a fairly narrow band of interpersonal interactions. One might treat these differences as merely verbal disputes. But we shouldn't. For one, expanding the term to cover all the varied phenomena sometimes now referred to as "gaslighting" runs the real risk of what's come to be called "semantic bleaching" or "concept creep," where a once powerful concept becomes little more than a tag of disapproval attached to other wise disparate phenomena. In philosophical terms, it's making a thin ethical concept out of what used to be a thick one. (Abramson 2024: 4)

Abramson argues that such "concept creep" comes with serious risks. It obscures differences between distinct phenomena and prevents us from recognising the distinctiveness of certain wrongs:

> There is a real, immediately recognizable interpersonal phenomenon picked out by the term "gaslighting," and if we expand the territory covered by the term too much, we will lose sight of and lose our ability to name that phenomenon. (Abramson 2024: 4)

We might worry that a similar problem arises for the term "objectification": that there is a tendency to stretch its usage to encompass any harmful or wrongful act related to gender-oppression (or other forms of oppression) to the extent that it may not tell us anything about the various phenomena other than that they are problematic. It may serve the goals of feminist theorising better to restrict its use to the original thought that it involves treating someone as an object and to distinguish it from morally distinct phenomena (infantilising someone, patronising someone, violating their autonomy).[15] And if we take this route, then we should insist that our account does capture the phenomenon of perceptual objectification. But there may be other perceptual phenomena – perceptually infantilising someone (seeing them as a child), perceptually violating someone's autonomy (seeing them as rapeable), which admit a parallel treatment.

Both responses strike us as promising. Defending either of the responses requires further work that would lead us beyond the scope of this paper.

6 | CONCLUSION

When talking about objectification, it is standard to reach for perceptual language. Objectification is taken to be a matter of seeing and treating someone as an object, where the "seeing" and the "treating" are taken to be closely related. The Perceptual Question asks what it means to see someone as an object. We argued that we can answer the Perceptual Question by deploying the notion of affordances – possibilities for action. As embodied beings humans afford others a plethora of possibilities for action. We can manipulate each others' bodies just as we manipulate objects. But we can also engage with each other as people. To perceptually objectify someone is to perceive object-related affordances with respect to them and for those object-related affordances to be salient in one's perceptual experience. The objectifying gaze is a standing disposition to perceive object-related affordances and for those affordances to be salient when interacting with another person or group. We argued that this allows us to spell out the tight connection between seeing and treating someone as an object because affordances can directly cause

action. We also argued that our account can make sense of the act of looking being a central feminist concern and of how objectifiers project qualities onto the people they objectify with problematic normative consequences.

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ENDNOTES

[1] See, e.g. Siegel (2014), Bengson (2016), Nanay (2010).

[2] https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/apr/29/beach-body-ready-ad-faces-formal-inquiry-as-campaign-sparks-outrage

[3] Several studies suggest that sexually objectifying images of men are becoming more prevalent and that men increasingly internalise these standards when evaluating their own bodies (e.g. Aubrey 2007; Davids et al. 2019). However, there remain considerable differences in *how* men and women are sexually objectified. First, the sexual objectification of women is far more commonplace, with women encountering objectifying images far more often than men (Aubrey 2007). Second, the beauty standards in play are very different. The male ideal of muscularity, though potentially harmful, is linked to power and agency in a way that reflects patriarchal hierarchies (e.g. Davids et al. 2019, Bareket & Shnabel 2020). Third, the cost of resisting objectification is far greater for women. The centrality of objectification to female norms means that resisting objectification, perhaps by deviating from gendered norms of appearance, risks social standing for women more than it does for men (McKinley 2011; Davids et al. 2019). Although Bareket & Shnabel (2000) discuss objectifying perception of men, they add the caveat that '[g]iven asymmetrical gender power relations, the male gaze toward women carries a substantially different meaning than the female gaze toward men'.

[4] Another powerful example is given by Mills with his reflections on the *invisibility* of black people who are seen by white people *as physical objects* but not seen *as a person in the same sense they are* (Mills 1998 quoted Brancazio 2020: 9). Collins (1986) also discusses the invisibility of black people as people and hence as subjects whose experiences matter for sociological research and theorising.

[5] Stock links the phrase '*seeing as a body*' to a technical sense of 'seeing-as' used in the philosophy of art. Consider seeing a cloud *as* an elephant (Stock 2018: 301). Here there is an object X that is present (the cloud) and some other object Y that is not present (the elephant) and - thanks to a perceptual gestalt shift - Y is perceptually present in X. This framework is not readily applied to perceptual objectification. When a person X is perceived as an object, there is not some other object Y that is present in the perception of X. So although Stock appeals to this conception of 'seeing-as', the account she gives in terms of visual attention doesn't seem to involve the same perceptual phenomenon.

[6] A similar thought is found in Bartky's notion of 'fragmentation': 'To be dealt with in this way [i.e. objectification] is to have one's entire being identified with the body, a thing which in many religious and metaphysical systems, as well as in the popular mind, has been regarded as less intrinsically valuable, indeed, as less inherently human, than the mind or personality.' (Bartky 1990: 35)

[7] Another issue here is whether we really perceive a person's mental properties in the first place. People *seem* to us to have particular mental states, but whether this is actually built into perceptual experience is contentious (for a balanced argument see Neufeld 2020).

[8] See McClelland & Sliwa (2023).

[9] There are many different ways of unpacking this notion of solicitation. Some build it into the content of the perceptual experience so the biscuit is perceived *as soliciting eating* (Siegel 2014). Some suggest that the biscuit is simply perceived as edible but the agent also has the experience of being *moved* to act on this affordance (McClelland & Jorba 2023). And

a host of subtly different options are also available. For our purposes we can talk of soliciting affordances without taking a stance on such matters.

[10] Brancazio (2020) pulls apart the different ways terms like 'social affordance' are used in the literature. Although some of the literature targets one person affording social interaction to another, other parts of the literature target the *environment* affording social interaction (e.g. a well-designed shared space), *technology* affording social interaction (e.g. social media) and perception of *ordinary* physical affordances being shaped by social norms (e.g. learning that society approves exploiting a chair's sitting affordance over exploiting its standing affordance). See also de Carvalho (2020).

[11] Salience has garnered a lot of philosophical attention recently but different authors work with subtly different notions of salience. On our gloss here, a property or affordance is salient if it occupies your focal attention. Salience thus has a phenomenological component: if a property or affordance is salient, this manifests in what your experience is like. Our gloss is in line with accounts of salience by Watzl (2017) and Whiteley (2022). An alternative way of glossing salience is in terms of accessibility (Munton 2023) – thus a property or affordance is salient insofar as it is more accessible for further cognitive processing than other properties or affordances. On this view, salience need not manifest in phenomenal presence.

[12] An alternative would be to say that perceptual objectification admits of degrees. The more object-related affordances are dominant in your perceptual experience, the more strongly you objectify.

[13] We can go further and consider the underlying character traits that dispose someone to adopt the objectifying gaze. The habitual objectifier presumably has a standing disposition to adopt the objectifying gaze. This trait is then a *disposition to have a disposition* and manifests itself over an extended timescale. Such layers of dispositions are helpfully explored by Jessie Munton (forthcoming) in the context of salience.

[14] See McClelland and Sliwa (2023).

[15] See Bauer (2015) for a different critique of the concept of sexual objectification.

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