

The Gaze

Advanced / Undergraduate

A division separates the activity of the gaze, prolonged, contemplative, yet regarding the field with a certain aloofness and disengagement... from that of a glance, a furtive or sideways look... carrying messages of hostility, collusion, rebellion and lust. Norman Bryson.

***“There are very few deadlines shorter than a subjects patience.”
John Loengard.***

The eyes are the single most defining characteristic of how we relate and define each other - the most important place to look is into another's eyes - to see the truth of their communication, to reveal, verify and understand for ourselves what we see in each other and the world around us.

The eyes are also the most romanticized part of the body in art. They are mythologized, eulogized and never explained, which adds to their mystery and perpetuates their use as the most dynamic focus point of the great works of visual communication. We owe much of our richness of culture to the feelings we describe through our arts through what we have witnessed with our eyes and through the eyes of others. It is this relationship of the created work, by the person of vision or passion, with the process of seeing that needs exploring through the quote above.

Norman Bryson is an art historian who looks at the way we see things based on class models of who we are in society. In his book¹, he tries to explain that looking is a predetermined act, based on the cultural luggage we bring to the things we see. He talks about painting in his book, but his quote above can be used to start a debate about seeing and photography. In simple terms, Norman Bryson tries to enliven the debate by stating two polar opposite views to encourage reaction. The division between glance and gaze is somehow a division of intent - the gaze is forceful, concentrated, the glance is a passing look, something noticed in the midst of engagement elsewhere - a pleasant coincidental distraction. Yet both ways of looking, of which there are as many as us, are not so dissimilar.

¹ The Gaze and the Glance in Vision and Painting
The Logic of the Gaze
Norman Bryson, 1982, Macmillan

Our fundamental understanding of the world does not rely on the quantity of time we give the subject of our intentions. It relies on the quality of thought and technique of translation if this observation is to be successfully communicated through an artistic representation. The universal truth that no two people are alike leads to the conclusion that no two people see the world in the same way.

Quietly simply, Bryson applies a moral value to the act of seeing relying on the perceived intent of the viewer in terms of the subject. This moral value is inferred with the division between gaze as somehow pure, masterful, and glance as something stolen, illicit, subversive.

There is no real evidence that I have read or through my own experience that would suggest that the longer one looks at something, the better the insight into the inherent meaning of the subject in view. Often, the opposite can be true, a glimpse of something can reveal more than a prolonged study, clichés like “can’t see the wood for the trees” come to mind.

While it is true that there are levels of observation, best described in the nuances of the language we use, verbs like; to look at, to see, to view, etc. all relate to the same action in varying degrees, and these degrees are dependent on degrees of attention, rather than moral valuation.

Bryson regards the gaze as a channel, and a used channel to define a power relationship, and a socio-political relationship between the author, the work, the viewer of the work - pretty much everything to do with process. Except that looking at the moral possibilities doesn't explain how the length of time one sees a work as a viewer, an author, or a subject can influence the understanding on any number of sensory awareness levels.

The distance between the gaze and the glance is not a moral conundrum, as playfully presented, nor is it a game. It is more important than that, and should be taken seriously. Unfortunately Bryson's attempt to seriously explain the difference falls, like those he has influenced in photographic practice and writing, on a caste system of interpretation, understanding and perception.

Even worse, this “how one understands art” caste system is based on a theory of a social class system that still is part of English society, yet never fully agreed upon.

To be fair to Bryson, in his writing he doesn't mention the class system per se, but it is implied via a hierarchy imposed – his “superstructure.” He uses the analogy of the sign, a constructed formation of recognition that cannot be understood without analysis of social economic base.

The class system is later applied to the subject of gaze by John Taylor in ‘A Dream of England²’.

Bryson also takes the understanding that if the subject viewed is one that has been represented to the viewer in a previous context and medium, in a book, a postcard, etc, then the process of looking is reduced to recognition of that subject as a sign that fulfills the expectation of the journey. This reduces the artist to an interpreter, one who colludes with the viewer of the finished work into allowing a personal interpretation to give the work its meaning. Nothing stands alone - nothing innocent of a conspiracy of sight - and meaning through analysis, coding and placement into a hierarchy.

Thus the gaze has a complex process behind it, rich in meaning and history, social judgment and assumed masculine superiority. The gaze has purpose, confining the elusive, challenging the furtive look - the glance.

Once again some moral righteousness has been applied to the furrowed brow of the gaze - its seriousness delivering insight. The glance is a second division attribute of a passer by, unable to see the same things as seen by the educated mind. This is said without irony - and with almost scientific evidence of a history of English landscape tied to the rural myth of “Ye Olde England” that Americans and Japanese tourists come to see.

Are these tourists fools, buying a dream they cannot see? What are they looking at - the landscape or their own interpretation of it, or their own ignorance, blinded to it by the reality they find themselves in? Is anything iconic spared the irony of universal inaccessibility? Are we all, travelers (gazers), tourists (glancers), or trippers (lowest of the low - blurred snappers), victims of our inability to see anything for what it is, but only for what it represents itself as to us at our unauthentic, hyper real visit?

If so, the things we see but do not spend prolonged attention studying, are the real things that haven't had the time to be iconocised and separated into objects of gaze by artistic representation or otherwise. Are they universal truths on another level that humanity has yet to glamorize

² A Dream of England, Landscape, Photography and the Tourist's Imagination
Jon Taylor, Manchester University Press, 1994

by social convention? How do we look at these everyday occurrences, yet to be famous enough to be famous? We glance past them with out barely registering their importance.

This is talking about the glance as a one way system, upon a landscape that cannot talk back. So it is with portraiture that we find the most difficult relationship with the gaze and the glance.

In a fixed canvas, one where the perspective of the viewer and the seen is given as an understood, the power relationships are between a reflection of a geometric space in a canvas, and in the geometric space of the eye. The relationship that these two plains have is based on a subjective valuation unique to the viewer at a particular time. This is of course, counter intuitive as is the ideal of a true vision is as much of a fiction as it can be a truth.

Here lies the contradiction, that the viewer of a scene can, based on pre-imagined ideal of that scene, and the excitement of the pilgrimage to that scene, can see the scene differently than imagined, explained, or hoped. It is a unique coincidence, giving rise to experience. The same circumstances apply to the viewer who looks upon a work of art, or anything.

More to the point is the study of the gaze regarding portraiture. In a more perspectivist analysis, the narrative is suppressed, in favour of a descriptive visual surface. The world presented is different to the beholders position, and not reliant on it. The image is not just contained in the frame, but extends beyond it. The perspectivist savors the discrete particularity of visual experience and resists the temptation to allegorize or typologize what it sees.

Value, moral or otherwise, attachment to either perspectivist or perceptivist way of looking, when applied is counter productive. Even Bryson, to his credit again, mentions in "The gaze in the extended view" that discoveries come in terms not of my making, indifferent to my morality. "Vision is something built cooperatively over time."

In Bryson's terms, the gaze "arrests the flux of phenomena... outside the mobility of duration... the viewing subject unites his gaze with the founding perception in a moment of perfect recreation of that first epiphany." Here Bryson suggests that the absolute eye is universal. The conjunction of the work and the viewer conforms to a universal perception. The original standpoint of the viewer is subjugated to the secondary in favour of the universal vision conformed to by the process.

It is in human nature to create the ideal, and try to mould the world to that ideal.

But abandoning any form of universal understanding of ideals leaves theorists with conundrums, which are unacceptable if a theory is to have success. In order to try understanding the mechanics of the gaze let us abandon the theorists, and examine the practitioners of photography specifically, with reference to these points presented thus far.

Before I look at photography specifically, let us study some ideas about the role of the gaze in human social behaviour. Early studies of the gaze began in the seventies. One such study is "The Gaze and Mutual Gaze" by Michael Argyle and Mark Cook. In this book, the phenomenology of the gaze, the biological and cultural basis of the gaze is examined.

Gaze in a natural context is dependent in humans on defining the relationship with the people or group where eye contact is made. In social terms, the gaze is first introduced in babies in the feeding stage, the look of affirmation between babies and mothers. The sight limits of early humans are that of the distance between heads of the mother and breast feeding child. Later this develops and becomes more complex, but the determining factor in social relationships is the gaze between the dominant members of a social hierarchy and the lowered gaze of the subservient.

The eyes are the single most defining characteristic of how we relate and define each other - the most important place to look is into another's eyes. Mutual gaze is arousing, and depending on the situation may lead to attack or withdrawal. The gaze is also a threat signal between same and different species, leading to flight or aversion of gaze in submission.

The direction of gaze in a social context is often toward the most dominant member of the group. Studies of primate groups suggest they have an attention structure in which attention is directed upwards to the most dominant animals, and that this attention hierarchy leads to social cohesion.

This also applies to humans, and explains why low status people look more than high status - and are often disbarred from looking at their peers, by separation or by decree, and in a variety of dispersed cultures.

In humans and primates, eye signals are also used in courting, an affiliate signal. In all other species, gaze is primarily for aggression.

The gaze has cultural meaning which is impossible to separate from the circumstance - Navaho Indians are taught not to look directly at another person during conversation. Among the Witoto and Bororo Indians in South America a speaker and listener both look at outside objects during conversation, and a story teller turns their back on listeners and addresses the back of the hut. In Japan people do not look each other in the eye much, but are taught to look at the neck, which bring the eyes and face into peripheral vision. In Nigeria and older or high status person must not be looked at directly in the eye during conversation. There is a learnt taboo in gaze in most cultures, which is past on to children during socialization.

So in a photograph, gaze is used as a device by the photographer and the subject to direct the social interaction between the viewer and that person being photographed in the portrait.

In amateur photographic guides the language of the gaze is reduced to one of the alpha dominant in the social role. The photographer is gifted with divine power to capture images for his satisfaction and purpose, regardless of the outcome for those photographed. The gaze is hunted, and the subject subservient. This extends to professionals, especially photojournalists, who are filled with a righteous calling to record at whatever expense. It is an old dilemma, and one without resolution here.

The inflection is always on the controlling photographer, rather than the amount of control, if any, the sitter has. Obviously in an arranged sitting, the subject has made a choice to attend, and be photographed, but for candid work, where the photographic opportunity is a glance, the lines are more blurred. Would it be fair to say that any portrait not made with the express consent and cooperation of the subject is stealing? To some extent yes, but how does our predominantly male imperial culture regard this experience? As evidence that requires gathering for a greater good? The people are subjects of scientific scrutiny? The methodology and the language and the cultural imposition are confusing. Is the formal gaze of the conspiratorial sitter is more honest, or more manipulated?

In order to examine these issues it is best to discuss specific photographers, and their contributions to their working method. It must be said, that compared to painting and other longer established media, the study of the gaze in photography is minimal and inadequate. Often it is a derivation from works on painting or cinema, which draws interesting and sometimes relevant parallels.

The first study is about a photography project undertaken in the old USSR called "Russian Self Portraits" by David Attie in the 1976. As part of a cultural exchange program, Attie used the technique of collaboration to allow ordinary people to photograph themselves with large format equipment. The results were processed in a special darkroom set up so the people attending the exhibition could see the whole photographic process, and the resulting prints exhibited.

In Attie's words, "the pneumatic cable release was held as if a foreign object, people looked away from the camera, at the lights, or themselves in mirrors positioned so they could see what the camera was recording."

The pictures showed ordinary people against a plain studio background, plainly uncomfortable with having the photographic equipment around them, yet voluntarily accepting the process which they are putting themselves through.³

In this free environment, are people aware of the gaze they give the camera? Every face tells its own story, not all fit into any category, some chose to glare at the camera, others are confused as to which way to look. The issue of control in the series is confusing- are the Americans, with their high tech presence, regarded as dominant in the photographic relationship? Are the Russians feeling and understanding this possible relationship? Or is it working on a much simpler level? Are these people taking the opportunity to experience something new in terms of cultural exchange, but being familiar with the process of photography, using the experience to record themselves in perpetuity?

In this process, the whole experience of photography is striped bare and laid out in a exhibition hall, including the participatory experience. Attie is left as a shutter cocker, a technician for the participants. There is minimal communication due to language separations, everything is happening on a visual level. The understanding of this level of control and opportunity is reflected in the pictures- meant to be as records of self, and treated as such by the subjects. Pictures show people dressed in Sunday best and not really full of ideas on how they looked in on film, but of ideas of how they looked in real life, and wanted that on film. Their gaze is their reflection.

So the complexity of the process belies the simplicity of the result, and the intensity of its meaning. Here people are representing themselves, in an

³ Russian Self Portraits
David Attie, 1977, Thames and Hudson

environment of their choice, by virtue of wanting to be there, in a way they can see develop, by witnessing the production line as part of the exhibition process. All they have to do is press the button, an action which they understand in context to their situation.

The gaze is now engaged, direct. The variety of looks show every range of emotion. For some, the time involved has been short, they were passers by and saw the line in the street, giving no thought to their appearance they chanced upon the shoot totally unprepared and with out warning. Others planned their appearance beforehand having heard of the project in the press. Are those unprepared glimpsing themselves in a sophisticated way? Has coincidence given them an elongated glance in a mirror, one that will last forever as a record, their record? Where does this project fit with Bryson's division?

Even more complex is a circumstance which happens in cinematic language known as "look back."

This is best described as a reciprocal gaze of the screen to mesmerize or entrance the intended audience. In "It looks at you, the returned gaze of the cinema," Wheeler Winston Dixon explains ..." there is a look that is returned by the frame, by a force deep within the field it embraces, a force focused by the rectangular dimensions of the screen, a window, a portal, an emitter of light to an audience."⁴

In photography, one can easily swap terminology to analogize the parallel relevance. The difference is in the time the viewer has to witness the look back. In the film, the medium is moving, in the photograph, the medium is still, but does this negate the look back or intensify it?

The power of the returned gaze, I suggest, is not in the time one is exposed to it. In films by Andy Warhol, his "Screen tests" made in 1960, the camera is static and gazes intensely into the eyes of the subject, and vis a vis. These are elongated stills, as much as they are a departure from cinematic procedure. They borrow from each medium but stand alone as a departure from both.

Watching the different subjects, they behave in different ways, Lou Reed, for example, glances at the camera, never really spending too much time in contemplation of it. Others, like Dennis Hopper, both gaze and glance

⁴ It Looks at You, the returned gaze of the cinema
Wheeler Winston Dixon, 1995, State of University of New York Press,

at the screen. Either way one is compelled to look- and the compulsion needs to be explored.

In defining the device in use with the look back, one has options in theoretical language. The hyper real approach would define the camera a machine capable of moving through time and space, the freedom of hyper reality allowing the transgression of boundaries of subject / object, active / passive and gender gaze. In this environment it is impossible to isolate the process of the real, or prove the real. It is elusive, independent of time. It tends to lead the viewers inevitably to look within themselves.

Conversely, there is the idea that the screen shifts the conception of the real by using codes of visual culture, by inserting a screen of signs, layers of recognized meaning to which one defers. This reduces the look to the symbolic, the real being understood as an effect of representation, which the viewer has access to decode as a privilege of being at the top of the evolutionary tree. This suggests an imposition of order over too variable a set of circumstances - and divides the glance and gaze on the moral and temporal grounds disputed earlier.

There remains to be done a major study on the dynamic between viewer and object in photography. Dividing the glance and the gaze on moral grounds based on outmoded colonial precepts forms a starting point, but fails to go beyond the empirical and simplistic.

End.