

The Gaze

Beginners / GCSE / OCN Level 2 / City & Guilds 6923 Level 2

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.

In art, the eyes are portrayed as the most romantic part of the body. They are the windows into the work, where our attention is drawn first - the Mona Lisa being the most famous example. The eyes are our primary tool for witnessing the great moments in culture, through a lens, or through a painting or sculpture. We need to explore how the eyes, and what we see is changed by the ways we look at things; things we know and have gone to find, or things we are seeing for the first time.

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. Very simply, Bryson tries to stir up controversy by stating opposite views, to invite debate. He says the gaze is forceful, deliberate, and the glance is a passing look, and applies a moral difference between the two. In reality the two methods of observation are not that far apart.

How we look at things doesn't really depend on how much time we spend looking at them. Often one quick look is enough - think of phrases like 'love at first sight.' Furthermore, no two people will see the same thing is the same way.

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

Bryson tries to say that the gaze is somehow morally superior to the glance, by suggesting the gaze is pure, and the glance something stolen.

An attempt to explain what he means is the act of viewing by a tourist, something we all have experience doing. Say you are a fan of the novels by the Brontë sisters, and you have imagined the landscapes where their novels were set in your mind. You decide that the family holiday must include a tour of "Brontë Country" in the north of England, and you go fully prepared with an itinerary of places mentioned in their books. You have come to gaze, with prior knowledge and expectation of what you will see. Now the landscape has become a symbol of something you have imagined, and you are either disappointed if it doesn't live up to your expectations, or delighted if it does. The landscape has ceased to be just a landscape, but a symbol that has a moral value placed on it by your expectation. Your gaze, the deliberate look, focused and with knowledge, studies the landscape; you are trying to have it fulfill those expectations.

Imagine your family hasn't read any Brontë books. They are just glancing out from the car window enjoying the landscape on a totally different level - Bryson would argue that this is a lower level than your gaze, but is this necessarily true? How can enjoyment be measure like this? It could be argued that the prior knowledge is a burden, dooming you to either like the landscape or not depending on your previous imaginings of how it would be. The other people in the group who know nothing of Bronte country are simply enjoying what they see for the first time - subtle differences, but telling nonetheless.

So far we have talked about the gaze in landscape art, in this case literal representation through novels. If we look at the difference between the gaze and the glance in portrait photography, will we find the same problems with Bryson's arguments?

Eye contact between people forms the basis of how we deal with each other in a social context. In Japan, people talk to each other face to face, but the eyes are always on the other person's neck, as a form of politeness. In some cultures, storytellers actually face away from the audience when they recite the legends. In the animal kingdom, a direct gaze into another animal's eyes is an act of aggression, and a look away is an act of submission.

In a portrait photograph, the gaze of the subject into the camera lens is a convention that allows the photographer to bring out the subject by directly confronting the viewer with eye contact. It is an expression of

power, one in which the photographer has direct control. So the gaze in this instance is a predetermined moral position by the photographer, and the subject with regard to the viewer of the photographic print. In photojournalism, the conventions are different, and the glance is the more common tool. The photojournalist actually steals the image, often against the subjects will, in pursuit of the story and the best picture. Here, the glance is furtive, as Bryson describes, the photographer has a different power.

In my work reveal, the subject of this website, you will see that I have asked the subjects to look into the camera, and they know how the images will be presented, and how important this gaze will be because they are showing themselves through the eye contact they make with you the viewer of the final work.

It is fair to say, that the colour photographs I have taken as observations are in fact glances, some things I noticed in the space where the portraits were taken. I have tried to blend the two notions of gaze and glance into one project, allowing the moral values to be construct by the subjects, the viewers, and the pictures themselves.

End.