

## The Gaze

Intermediate / A Level / OCN Level 3 / City & Guilds 6923 Level 3

***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 book<sup>1</sup>, 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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 iconoclasted and separated into objects of gaze by artistic representation or otherwise. Are they universal truths on another level that humanity has yet to glamorize 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 the at 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.

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 Wituto 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.

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<sup>2</sup> ..." 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."

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.

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<sup>2</sup> It Looks at You, the returned gaze of the cinema  
Wheeler Winston Dixon, 1995, State of University of New York Press,

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 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 viewer 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.

Glossary of terms:

Eulogized: treated as a religious icon

Iconic: something familiar that becomes a cultural symbol, over and above its regular meaning

Hyper real: a theme explored by Umberto Eco in his essays and books, where situations are intense due to a concentration of events in a short time frame or location, giving rise to a feeling of being in a place or time that is special and apart from reality, where real things or events appear exaggerated.

Signs: layers of meaning which are familiar, but are often in the background and taken for granted - conventions we adhere to without resorting to analysis each time we do.

Empirical: ideas we form based on evidence in our normal domain.