

gaze

"If thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee" -- Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

The range of meaning of the verb "to see" is so vast that a typical thesaurus contains a list of fifty-odd synonyms, among them "to look, glimpse, eye, notice, stare, etc." While each word involves the act of [perception](#) per se, all have slightly different shades of connotation: for example, "behold" has religious undertones, "scrutinize" involves some sort of intellect, and "gape" indicates an element of surprise. From this long list of synonyms, however, "gaze" has almost been singled out for use in discussions about art. Critics rarely theorize about simply "looking," similarly one hardly "glares" or "peeks" at a painting. What is it specifically about the term "gaze"? The Oxford English Dictionary defines the verb gaze as "to look fixedly, intently, or deliberately at something," but also mentions that in early use gaze merely meant "to look vacantly or curiously about."¹ While the exact origins of the word gaze are unclear, a possible root is in the Old Norse word "gaw" meaning to gape or stare. These early versions of gaze contain none of the analytical implications that the word now invokes in contemporary criticism; why the sudden shift in meaning?

A possible explanation lies in the growing awareness/concern in the twentieth century with the implications of the gaze and its role in understanding the function of art. Before the twentieth century, the gaze was noticed insofar as it functioned within its particular medium; for example, early critics recognized when gazes were returned or reflected in a painting but their analysis rarely extended beyond the canvas itself. A gaze here seems interchangeable with a glance. In contrast, contemporary art criticism focuses on how the gaze is used as a vehicle for [communication](#), and how exactly a gaze transmits information and assumptions about the viewer/viewed. Here a gaze can transcend the medium in which it is produced and contains social implications beyond its function within the work of art. The definition of gaze has thus evolved from just a "look" into an "intent" look (i.e. the intent behind the gaze becomes crucial for its definition) and gaze can be thought of as a dynamic medium bridging the gap between art form [[link](#)] and social theory. Other words for seeing simply do not contain this same ability to integrate politics with art history.

A gaze can be used to confer meaning upon a piece, whether the gaze emanates from the viewer or the work of art. Michel Foucault examines the peculiar function of the gaze in "Las Meninas" and argues that the ensuing relationship between the gaze of the [spectator](#) and the gaze of the painting break down the usual binary nature of the gaze (i.e. between viewer/gaze and viewed/gaze). In this painting, the spectator himself becomes the subject

keywords cross references

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of the painting, captured by the gaze of the painter insofar as he remains a spectator gazing at the painting. As the spectator thus becomes part of the spectacle the "observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange. No gaze is stable...subject and object, spectator and model reverse their roles into infinity."² The interplay (or communication) between the two gazes thus blurs the boundaries between the two roles until it becomes unclear who exactly is gazing at whom; the gaze becomes a mode of interaction between spectator and the work of art.



This cross-over between the boundaries of art and reality [link] is the starting point for Fried's argument against literalist art; he claims that literalist art only exists to be interpreted and without the gaze of the beholder it is meaningless (i.e. it must be designated "art" to be transformed into art). Fried sees this reliance upon the gaze as the degeneration of art, and is concerned that the stage presence of literalist art seeks to control the entire situation in which it is interpreted (including therefore the body of the spectator, who becomes an unwilling participant of the piece upon entering the gallery). The medium of literalist art thus incorporates the gaze of the beholder, and Fried objects to the pervasiveness of literalist art, preferring more distance between a work of art and its beholder as "we are all literalists most or all of our lives. Presentness is grace."³ The gaze of the spectator should remain distinct from the domain of art.

In this way value gets attached to theories of looking-as-gaze, and being subjected to the gaze of others becomes a means to deny our own subjecthood. Jean Paul Sartre saw the gaze as the battleground for the self to define and redefine itself; we become aware of our self as subject only when confronted with the gaze of the Other and become aware of our self as object. The gaze of the Other is outside our immediate control and the way the gaze objectifies us robs us of our freedom as a subject: "insofar as I am the object of values which come to qualify me without my being able to act on this qualification or even to know it, I am enslaved."⁴ Indeed a certain power dynamic is inherent within the gaze as a medium and images possess a very commanding presence- there is a perverse pleasure in looking and not being able to look away. Much like the gaze of Medusa turned the onlooker into stone, so too does the image hold the power to immobilize its viewer.

Foucault extends this almost paranoid notion of the gaze into the realm of surveillance, arguing that the gaze becomes the perfect medium for spreading domination. Power becomes manifest in a disembodied gaze and spread over the minutest aspects of life, perpetuating itself not through external force but through internal penetration. Seen at the level of medicine, the gaze becomes the "speaking eye" that surveys and describes

Oxford English Dictionary Online. [link: dictionary.oed.com] (30 January 2008).

Sartre, Jean Paul. 1956. "The Look." In *Being and Nothingness*. New York: Philosophical Library.

Notes

1 Oxford English Dictionary Online (30 January 2008).

2 Foucault, "Las Meninas," 5.

3 Fried, 23.

4 Sartre, 110.

5 Foucault, "Seeing and Knowing," 114.

6 Foucault, "Panopticism," 205.

7 Mulvey, 19.

8 hooks, 121.

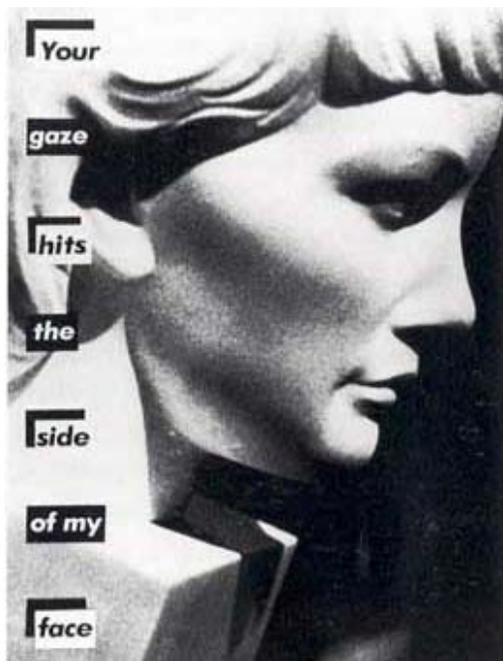
9 Lacan, 105.

10 Ibid, 73.

11 Elkins, 210.

everything; the eye becomes the "depository and source of clarity," equated with knowledge which in turn is equated with power.⁵ The medical gaze is soon extended to power relations, where everyone becomes objects of an overarching gaze whose "inspection functions ceaselessly, the gaze is on alert everywhere."⁶ Order is established not through steel bars but through the submission of everyone to an omnipresent and impenetrable gaze; we are seen yet cannot see.

Other theories of spectatorship, especially in film theory, rely heavily on Lacan's notion of the gaze and how it functions as the point of identification in the mirror stage (see [mirror](#)). The gaze becomes the medium for self-differentiation; like a child first individuates his ego when confronted by his mirror image, so does the spectator derive his identity when confronted by a film image. Laura Mulvey argues that the cinema is the medium for male subjects to further exert their mastery over female objects, identifying with the dominant gaze of the camera. The darkness of the movie theatre eliminates the usual shame in looking and the male audience can unreservedly identify with its projected ego-ideal on the screen; "the male gaze projects its fantasy upon the female figure" who becomes simultaneously idealized and immobilized.⁷ Women are to be looked at and put on display; both the camera apparatus and the male gaze regulate their gaze and thus women can only identify with the self as an object. Mulvey concludes that the gendered gaze of the cinema systematically determines who sees and who is seen, and the gaze serves as an aggressive medium for male domination, as depicted by Barbara Kruger's famous image.



This theory of the gaze as an instrument of mastery stripping female spectators of their agency met a lot of resistance, especially from feminist writer bell hooks. hooks contrasts Mulvey's male gaze with her theory of the "oppositional gaze", a gaze usually excluded from feminist film theory but nonetheless illustrates a means of resistance and agency of change among black female spectators. hooks points out that there are moments of rupture in film where the spectator resists complete identification with the film, and argues that many female black spectators have actively refused to identify with the film, choosing to laugh or criticize the white representations of blackness that they saw rather than be defined by them. These women occupied a space outside Mulvey's active/male and passive/female dichotomy, and hooks states that "the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination opens up the possibility of agency;"⁸ in this case the gaze mediates between agency and resistance.

Another important portion of Lacan's theory involves the gaze not as a seen gaze but

rather as a gaze imagined in the field of the Other (he thus distinguishes between the eye and the gaze, where the eye viewing the object belongs to the subject but the gaze is only on the side of the object). The gaze becomes the "objet a in the field of the visible" (see [object petit a](#)) or rather the object of unattainable desire that we seek in the Other.⁹ Lacan here differs fundamentally from Foucault, who sees desire only as a tool of power and equates the gaze with the perfect instrument for mastery. When analyzing Holbein's "The Ambassadors," Lacan notices that depending on the position of the spectator, the distorted figure in the front of the painting becomes the figure of a skull. Lacan sees this as the site of the gaze, or the point in the painting at which the object looks back at the spectator and invites participation (similar to Foucault's reading of "Las Meninas"). There is an inherent desire in the gaze for involvement, but it maintains a kind of aloofness and discourages complete involvement: "the gaze is not the vehicle through which the subject masters the object, but a point in the Other that resists the mastery of vision."¹⁰



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A gaze is an important medium for communication, although a lot of internal contradictions still exist in contemporary art criticism about its role in the relationship between spectator and object and its extension in to social theory. James Elkins even sees gaze less like an act of looking and more like an act of blindness, arguing that the gaze becomes more and more blind the more one forcefully tries to see.¹¹ The function of the gaze is central to theories about paintings and films as media, but is also found in more two-way encounters like videoconferences, which create the illusion of being able to see and communicate directly with another person through the gaze, but the gaze itself remains mediated through computers and the Internet. Even advertisements utilize the gaze to both construct and maintain visual grammars (i.e. ways of thinking about visual images and compositions). What can be described in a paragraph can be summed up in a single image; for example, we interpret a woman gazing at a bottle of perfume as a representation of desire. Perhaps gazes can be best seen as the providers of a broad code with which to interpret social behavior.

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