

The Loving Gaze – People and Places

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Gaze: Objectifying or Connecting?

The human eye is one of the most powerful forms nature has evolved. Light focussed through the aperture of the pupil falls on receptors in the retina; these cells code the light information, sending tiny electrical signals down the optic nerve to part of the brain specialising in giving us visual experience of the world. With their power to observe the environment, the eyes are a supremely mechanical tool of objectivity. Our eyes enable us to gaze at anything before them, near or far, the stars, a landscape or other people. Yet, although we can directly touch our own hands, smell our own skin, hear our own breathing, we cannot directly see our own eye.

So this marvellous instrument that enables us to take in so much of the world as an objective reality also reminds us of our profound subjectivity. Without other eyes to see us, we are not seen ourselves. The only eyes we are able to see are the eyes of another. And in doing so, we are also being seen. Looking at another, and being seen by another at the same time is still objective. But as the gaze creates another as its object, it simultaneously creates an experience of *subjectivity* in the one who is looking. The experience of *being looked at* – a passive position - is only possible through *looking* – which is active. It is thus that, through the human gaze, objectivity and subjectivity become *connectivity*. The object-making eye becomes the connection-making eye. We are linked to that we objectify.

The power of the gaze, its ability to project across the space between us, can also connect us in ways that are not loving, but attacking. While some common phrases speak of ‘drinking him in with her eyes’ and ‘giving her the glad eye’, other sayings refer to ‘looking daggers’ at someone, and, ‘if looks could kill’. Connection between people is still connection whether it’s made by a kiss or a fist. The power of looking can amount to a matter of life or death. According to the myth, those who gazed directly at Medusa, the Gorgon, would be turned to stone. Perseus avoids this fate and

kills her by using his shield – not conventionally to ward off blows but as a mirror to ward off her direct gaze as he aims to strike her.

Orpheus loses his beloved Euridyce in Hades but he is allowed to return to the underworld to retrieve her under one condition: he must lead her out himself, trusting her to follow, for if he ever looks back she would be required to stay. Orpheus cannot resist the urge to turn and look to see her following him and, in doing so, he loses Euridyce forever.

Two kinds of mirror

Theories of human development and growth of the personality, from the perspectives of psychoanalysis and developmental psychology have paid much attention to the function of the gaze between an infant child and its carers – usually the mother.

The centre aperture of the eye is called the ‘pupil’. This word has another meaning in English where it also refers to one who is learning from a teacher. This latter derives from an earlier meaning which was ‘orphan’. But both derive from the Latin word *pupilla* – the diminutive of *pupa* which means a child or doll. When we look into another’s eyes we see a miniature version of ourselves reflected on the glossy surface of their eye. We see ourselves and we see what they are seeing.

Through the eyes we are reflected by another and, as we are seen, we get a sense of being inside them. This is another aspect of the objective-subjective connection created by the gaze.

Psychoanalysts Donald Winnicott and Heinz Kohut draw our attention to this function of the gaze between mother and infant. By looking lovingly at her child and thus making her eyes available to the infant, the mother offers the baby a mirroring reflection of himself in her loving gaze. This offers a containment and holding that goes with the cradling that her arms provide and helps build up the infant’s internal confidence in being ‘held in mind’ even when mother is not actually present.

Heinz Kohut – working in the 1960s and 70s - found many of his patients suffering from low self-esteem leading to defensive, narcissistic behaviour. What they needed from the therapist was an

empathic, reparative relationship. They had suffered from poor experiences of the mother's gaze and inadequate mirroring. They had not been granted, as Kohut puts it,

“‘The gleam in the mother's eye...’ the important prerequisite that the infant's magical omnipotence and its spontaneous ‘exhibitionist’ activities be received by the mother...with pleasure and empathic mirroring.....The empathically mirroring mother figure....will be gradually internalised. In other words, optimal maternal empathy lays the groundwork for development of a healthy self-esteem.” (Jacoby, 1990: 66)

Conversely, the avoidant gaze or the non-loving look can rob an infant of the benefits of connection with another. The gaze also gives rise to the experience of shame. Being shamed by another is to be looked at as an object. As one writer puts it,

“I see myself from ‘out there’, rather than seeing the world from ‘in here’. Shame is a kind of crisis, a moment of danger that puts in question both my self and my relation to the Other. This self which I am for the Other, will it still be loved?” (Wright, 1991: 30).

Another psychoanalyst, Jaques Lacan paid attention to the gaze and to mirroring in a different way to Winnicott and Kohut. For him, the infant's recognition of themselves as a whole, coordinated being – a first sense of I-ness – arises from the experience of seeing and knowing themselves in the mirror. Thus, for Lacan, we are always and forever knowing ourselves only from that which is outside ourselves, from the image that is reflected back to us. The ego is thus formed in alienation from itself. Unlike the loving, reflecting mother in Winnicott, the mother's gaze for Lacan perpetuates this alienation – as will the rest of the world. She is the one,

“who leads us away from ourselves into this maze of false reflections. For Lacan, development and growth into social being and awareness (into the symbolic and language....) seem to imply an essential and necessary alienation from our true being. It is indeed in the unconscious that our true being lies hidden”. (Wright, 1991: 15-16)

The eye and its gaze, the mirroring experience, and the gleam in another's eye all prepare the infant for a connection to the world beyond that of the mother. Indeed, this intense interpersonal experience is not present at the very start. At about six weeks the baby will be more fascinated by the parent's hairline than the eyes and may seem to avoid her gaze. The baby's senses are drawn to intensity of experience – like those found in the contrast between bright and dark. As a new born, one of my children stared with delight at the black and white striped wood-beam ceiling in his grandmother's house. The gaze at first draws the world towards us with feelings stimulated by novelty and contrast.

It is only at about three months that the baby enters what psychoanalyst and child psychologist Daniel Stern calls a 'face world'. The infant's new fascination, and central occupation is the reading of mother's face. "It is such a potent stimulus for him that its actions will completely define his immediate world". (Stern, 1990: 60). The baby knows mother's features well by now (and her partner's to some extent), and has expectations of what happens when certain expressions are seen and is disturbed when the face is flat and expresses nothing.

"Infants after about two and a half months of age react strongly to this [blank] face. They look about. Their smiles die away, and they frown....Where he has expected to enter the magic sound-and-light world of a face alive and responsive....he finds stillness and dullness". (ibid.: 61).

The experience of the face and the gaze is the infant's first step that paves the way for a lifetime of looking and being looked at, of objectifying the world and of drinking it into ourselves. Daniel Stern poetically imagines the baby's experience as mother's expressions change, vividly portraying how gazing into the face prepares us for gazing into the wider world.

"I enter the world of her face. Her face and its features are the sky, the clouds, and the water.....It is usually a riot of light and air at play. But this time when I enter, the world is still and dull. Neither the curving lines of her face nor its rounded volumes are moving. Where is she? Where has she gone? I am scared.....I search around for a point of life to escape to.

I find it.

All her life is concentrated into the softest and hardest points in the world – her eyes.

They draw me in, deeper and deeper. They draw me into a distant world. Adrift in this world, I am rocked side to side by the passing thoughts that ripple the surface of her eyes. I stare down into their depths.....

Gradually life flows back into her face. The sea and sky are transformed. The surface now shimmers with light. New spaces open out.” (ibid.: 58-9)

Gazing at the world: the eye and the lens

We have been considering the delicate balance between connection and objectivity – how the gaze is capable of making an objective Other of what it focuses upon, and yet also able to make an intimate connection with its object. More than simply seeing, looking always involves projecting a part of oneself into what is being looked at. It is as if the gaze is the starting point of joining in with that which interests us, of getting inside it empathically – whether this is a person, a picture, an object or a landscape.

I have experienced this vividly when viewing the paintings of Howard Hodgkins in an exhibition. A distinct experience and a narrative came to me despite there being no corresponding ‘reality’ represented in the abstract painting which could have suggested it. My empathic looking had allowed the painting to communicate to me beyond its surface image. I also think this empathic projection of the gaze explains the moderate fear I – and many others - experience in high places. Looking out into the empty space from a mountain or a high building my gaze projects me into the landscape to know it more fully; meanwhile my body knows I am unsafe out there in space ready to fall thousands of feet to the ground. The resulting feeling of fear makes me ‘pull back’ – I have to look away.

I think other people can get a similar experience when looking at another person. They can feel lost, swallowed up or negated. For some, the scrutiny of being photographed can have a similar effect.

The more superstitious can feel the photograph has stolen something from their soul or being. Others simply feel intruded upon. Moving and still photography alike have their objective function, but this is always accompanied by the desire of the photographer to take in his or her subject – to incorporate it as art for sharing with others. In this way the subject (or object) of the photographer’s gaze becomes a combination of the desiring eye of the photographer and the objective reality of the photographed person or object. When viewed by an audience, *both* these are combined with the additional gaze – and expectant desire - of the spectator. Patrick Keiller’s meditative film called *London* (1994), and its sequel *Robinson in Space* (1997), dwell on a range of unusual shots of London life and is narrated as if the speaker has a guide, Robinson, who has shown him all these sights (Keiller, 2005). The viewer is left free to find their own significance in the images over and beyond the commentary.

When the original red Routemaster bus was decommissioned in 2005, I made a short film of the last Routemasters and their crews set against their London background (Hauke, 2005). The scenes of London and the iconic elements of the bus’s design seemed to go together seamlessly and evoke youthful memories and nostalgia for a London only recently past. Gazing with love upon a city’s buildings and objects offers the equivalent of the loving look given to a cherished friend and binds the viewer to their subject.

Moving pictures were invented and became popular at the same time as psychoanalysis – around 1895 with the Lumiere brothers first short films being screened in the basement of a Paris café. It has been suggested that both psychoanalysis and movies met an urgent need in the new, city populations. The accelerated pace of life and changes in values brought about by late industrial capitalism; the rapid movement of people from the countryside to urban centres, new stimulating experiences brought by electric light and multi-coloured street posters, cars, trams and the railway, dramatically altered human life. Life in the new modernity was more chaotic, less familiar and unstable. As Karl Marx put it “All that is solid melts into air”. (from Tucker, 1978: 475-6).

Hysteria, panic, fainting and fugue states were common psychological reactions suffered by many.

Both moving pictures and psychotherapy offered the opportunity to have oneself and one's life contained and reflected back through the visual experience of the film, or the mirroring reflection of the therapeutic exchange. Both enabled a framing of reality and experience so it might be assimilated more easily.

Urban populations would be filmed – like the workers leaving a factory in the first Lumiere shorts – so they could later go and watch this unremarkable scene and other daily events projected onto a screen - transformed into a new experience by the act of being filmed. In Blackburn, England, early commercial filmmakers Mitchell and Kenyon filmed the population at work and play and would then advertise the screening in a Village Hall for all to see.

Turning real life into art, or your own life into a narrative through the reflective gaze, seems to offer a way of knowing and fully experiencing ourselves. I am a psychotherapist as well as a filmmaker and have long been sensitive to the effect my choice of what I film, and what or who I gaze at, has on me. (In addition to the effect it has on the other, of course). As I was saying earlier about the eye projecting empathically into what it looks at, I believe the selection and framing, then editing of what is filmed makes an intimate connection between the photographer and his or her subject.

The film director Anthony Minghella has noted that the very act of taking a photograph *changes* what is in front of the lens. Furthermore, different audiences can change a film – not simply in terms of the subjective experience of each individual, but by altering what the film appears to be 'about', and even their experience of the period of time spent watching it.

I think that the recreation of visual experience through film is closer to the mirroring function described by Winnicott and Kohut than that of Lacan. Vision and film are both capable of offering an alienating, cut-off, objectifying experience, but I think they have to be manipulated to do so. Our initial – and more powerful - tendency is to join in with what we are seeing, to connect ourselves with the object of the gaze, to love it not fight it. This is true of whatever we gaze at: our lover's eyes, our children at play, or, indeed, the places we love to see or the objects and the moments we cherish.

The loving gaze links us to the world.

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