

Vision and Sexuality

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I want to use this lecture to discuss the dominant way in which relations of visual dominance in the field especially of sexuality but really across many other domains of visual culture too has been understood for at least half a century. And having characterised that dominant form of understanding, I want to intimate to you that it is seriously, and even more seriously than that, absurdly, limited. If all goes well from my point of view, it will no longer be possible for you to hold exclusively to this imperious, indeed almost imperial account, for you will no longer be able to continue to ignore other kinds of relation and dynamic which may seem not only ubiquitous but, more importantly, much more interesting than the dominant account. If you find the prospect of letting go of this account of things disturbing, you should, as the phrase has it, look away now, and possibly for good.

I suggested at the end of my lecture 'The Philosophy of the Eye' that vision is profoundly locked together with ideas of power and itself a vehicle of the exercise of power. I said that the power of vision is strongly related to the importance of distance to vision. Vision puts me at a distance from the world, a distance that enables me, or gives me the fantasy of being enabled, to control and appropriate objects in it, that appear to be at my disposal. Vision, as the necessary adjunct and apparatus of predation, is the elementary form and ancestor of all technologies of remote control.

The fact that vision always involves distance means that vision must always involve and impart division, between seer and seen. And because there is always

space, interval, hiatus, in vision, the relation of remote control is always also bound up with wanting: not only with appropriation, but with the not-quite or not-yet that makes for the desire for appropriation. There is desire rather than simple satiation or accomplishment, simply because there is distance, and there must always be distance. This is what we call obvious, and I promise to weary you only for a moment by observing the elements that make up that word: *ob*, opposite to or up against and *via*, the road or the way. What is *obvious* gets in the way, obtrudes itself into what you may wish or expect to see. What is, or ought to be, obvious in sight, what stands in the way of looking, or the assimilation that looking at may, as we say 'look to', is the fact of the gap that keeps the looker and the looked at apart, the gap that must therefore be a part of every act or instance of looking. Because you can never at that moment of looking possess what you see, to 'have and hold' as we say, there is always wanting and waiting implied and actuated in looking. The difference between seeing and looking is that looking is projective, both in spatial and in temporal terms. You can look 'at' or 'for' for things, and perhaps must always in a sense do so, but you cannot 'see at' or 'see for' things. You do not simply look at objects of desire, you posit desire, you put desire into the picture, through every act of looking. The object of desire may be in the picture, but the desire itself (which is a relation and not an object) *is* the picture itself

The Male Gaze

Let me try quickly to recapitulate the principles that have been drawn out from some of the conditions of vision, especially as they relate to vision and sexuality. The argument that programmes much of our ways of thinking is set up by John Berger in his *Ways of Seeing* (1972), in which he declares that '*Men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves

being looked at' (Berger 1972, 47). Berger's account is filled out in relation to cinema more particularly, and adding the dimension of the pleasure of looking, in Laura Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', which first appeared in 1975:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire. (Mulvey 2009, 19)

Taken together, the Berger/Mulvey viewpoint on viewpoints constitutes one of the most spectacularly all-conquering academic claims ever made. For decades, year upon year, we have been exhorted and have excitedly acted out our assent to this paradigm of asymmetrical visual oppression. The operations of the eye have been identified with that mythopoeic malignity that has come to be known as the phallus, projected as a violently predatory, projective force, exercised preferentially on the soft and helpless bodies of female objects, projecting, penetrating, perforating, dissevering. What has been called 'the male gaze', understood to be reliably and exceptionlessly active, acquisitive and avaricious, creates the condition known as objectification, in a looking that reduces the one looked at to Mulvey's looked-at-ness. It is possible to make out these asymmetrical relations everywhere, the paradigm of dominative male looking deepening like a coastal shelf.

Indeed the male gaze has been extended metaphorically to many other circumstances, through notions like the imperial gaze, the white gaze, the western gaze, the neoliberal gaze (inevitably), the lesbian gaze, et alia and ad libitum, wherever there seems to be occasion or need to make out asymmetrical relations of power. Wherever there is a gaze there is the assumption of power exercised one-sidedly through spectatorship, along with the pleasure and the power concentrated at one bulging end of the scopic transaction, and weakness and oppression concentrated at the helpless other end.

To see only the asymmetry of the powerful looking subject and the tremulously looked-at object, or subject-made-object in trying to make sense of the relations between persons is a drastic reduction to only one set-up of the permutational possibilities of that relation. It is like being taught the scale of C-major and thinking you are now able to play the piano. There is much, much more that might be made out in the field of visual relations, especially in relations of sexuality, and relations between seers and seen who are themselves other seers. It is the drastic omissiveness of this picture of things and our desire to reduce visual relations to this picture that I will be preoccupied with in the remainder of this lecture.

Reflexivity

What is most drastically missing from the looker/looked-at dichotomy is reflexivity. (You may, by the way, often encounter the phrase 'self-reflexive' where what is meant 'reflecting, or reflecting on itself'. But the word reflexive, with the helpful little picture of crossed wires it internally provides in the 'x' with which it is spelled, already means 'self-reflective'. I will leave you to imagine for yourselves the kind of conceptual-corporeal contortions that would be required to be

‘self-reflexive’ that is, reflecting on your own self-reflection, and the hall of mirrors that would require to be installed to accomplish this fabulous auto-origami.

But we need nevertheless to be aware that our relations with others necessarily occur in and set up this kind of hall of mirrors. For the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan the primary act of appropriation can be imagined through the fable of what he calls the mirror stage, in which the child suddenly catching sight of itself in a mirror grasps itself as a unified coherent single being, rather than the pullulating bundle of sensations and appetites it has previously consisted of and experiences a kind of swelling jubilation. Lacan no more believes in the autobiographical actuality of this vision in the mirror than Plato believes that human beings are all in fact chained up in a dark cave watching colourful cartoons being projected on to the wall. Rather Lacan’s mirror-stage is an image of the child’s internalisation of the fact of being imaged, or being an image for another, some other seeing being. The mirror may be, for example, the gaze of the mother, a triumphant confirmation of the fact that I can see myself as something capable of being seen.

We have become very expert, obediently expert we might well say, at making out, in order to deprecate and denounce it, the aggressively diminishing power exercised in looking, for which sexual looking provides the model. The tradition of anti-ocularcentrism I alluded to in my lecture ‘The Philosophy of the Eye’ has the identification and denunciation of aggressive looking as its principal engine. There is no need to claim that there is no such thing as what Freud calls the scopophilic drive – (*Schaulust* is Freud’s original German expression before it was Hellenically spruced up in James Strachey’s English translation), in which you love through looking, but you also love your looking. But it is not the only tune that it is possible to play, or the only key in which to play it.

Needing to Be Seen

For we might, and if we have eyes to see I insist we must, posit something like the opposite of the scopophilic drive, though it will turn out to be far from a complete opposite. For the need to see is matched and even perhaps indirectly doubled and driven, by the need and desire to be seen. Indeed the need to be seen, the desire to see yourself being seen, is, for intensely social creatures like human beings, an indispensable condition of survival. Being is being able to be seen, to be, as we so tellingly say, seen to. It is the complex intensity of need, desire and satisfaction bound up in being seen that is most dramatically shrivelled by the theory that reduces being seen to objectification.

The need to be seen, or watched is, for example, primary in human children, for whom, like the young of many other species, well-being and even survival may depend upon the rivalrous struggle against siblings for the attention of the parents or carers from whom all the necessities of life proceed. New parents are often surprised with the intensity of this greedy hunger for attention, which can last for many years, and by how exhausting it can be to have one's parental gaze so ceaselessly and, as it seems, insatiably solicited: 'Dad, look at me' 'Look over here mum' 'Watch this'. It is odd that we have no better-adapted word than exhibitionism for this drive to be seen and taken visual account of, a sort of inverted curiosity. Exhibitionism does not cover it because although there may be something aggressive and demanding in exhibitionism, there is also something freely self-assertive: whereas the need to be seen can amount to a kind of desperation, founded on a lack or vacuity that is terrifying and desolating.

We may I think surmise that the growing demand from all quarters and among all groups for what is called

respect, a word that derives directly from Latin *respicere*, to look around, is an aggressively assertive mutation of this infant hunger to be seen. The agony of invisibility is dramatised powerfully toward the end of *Waiting for Godot* in which Vladimir is approached by a young boy who is seemingly the same as the boy who has appeared the previous evening at the end of the previous act, but who does not recognise and denies having been there:

BOY: What am I to tell Mr. Godot, Sir?

VLADIMIR: Tell him . . . (*He hesitates*) . . . tell him you saw me and that . . . (*He hesitates*) . . . that you saw me . (*Pause. VLADIMIR advances, the BOY recoils. VLADIMIR halts, the BOY halts. With sudden violence.*) You're sure you saw me, you won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me! (Beckett 1986, 86)

The need to be seen is simultaneously active and passive, in which one derives one's subjectivity from being able to be the subject of another's attention.

Vision is not only projective: it is also introjective. Vision requires space, distance, division, but also thereby procures it. The space opened up in vision between looking and its objects, also always opens up a potential space within the looker, in which you not only see, but are capable of seeing yourself looking, becoming therefore an object for yourself, and potentially therefore for others. This relates to sexuality in particular because sexual relations are, by and large, if only in principle, relations between congeners, or equivalents. In sexual relations we look not at eyeless objects but ocular subjects, capable of looking back and constituting us as objects. In fact one cannot but posit that looking back, meaning that in every act of what is called objectification, there is an

equivalent objectification of the subject in its act of looking.

Shame

Not only is being looked at far from an entirely passive condition, but, on the other side, or at the other end of the telescope, looking is very far from being a uniformly active affair. If the name we give to the pleasure in looking is voyeurism, with the suggestions of leering triumph that are active in that word, then the very fact that the voyeur is not merely having a look, but in fact lubriciously caught up in their own looking, and so is not only the subject of it, but also subject to it, makes them vulnerable to the reversal to which we give the name of shame. Shame, as the painful awareness of being on show, is a Germanic word that it seems likely has an origin in an Indo-European root *skem* meaning cover: the condition of shame is a condition of exposure, or discovery, from which one seeks to hide through covering or concealment.

Jean-Paul Sartre has famously dramatised this what-the-butler-saw set-up in the description he gives in *Being and Nothingness* of somebody on his knees looking through a keyhole:

Let us imagine that moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole. I am alone and on the level of non-thetic self-consciousness. This means first of all that there is no self to inhabit my consciousness, nothing therefore to which I can refer my acts to qualify them. They are in no way known; I *am* my acts... I am a pure consciousness of things... My attitude., is a pure mode of losing myself in the world, of causing myself to be drunk in by things as ink is by a blotter in order that an instrumental-complex oriented toward an end

may be synthetically detached on the ground of the world. The order is the reverse of the causal order. It is the end to be attained which organizes all the moments which precede it... This situation reflects to me both my facticity and my freedom

...

But all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me! What does this mean? It means that I am suddenly affected in my being and that essential modifications appear in my structure – modifications which I can apprehend and fix conceptually by means of the reflective *cogito*...

I now exist as myself for my unreflective consciousness... all of a sudden I am conscious of myself as escaping myself, not in that I am the foundation of my own nothingness, but in that I have my foundation outside myself. I am for myself only as I am a pure reference to the Other. (Sartre 1984, 235-6)

I would like briefly to return to the remark I quoted earlier from Laura Mulvey, to suggest some of the complexities that lie latent in what otherwise seems so manifest in the male gaze paradigm. I want to snatch up in particular what might have been an unconsidered trifle in her characterisation of 'woman as sexual object', namely that as a result of such objectification, woman 'holds the look'. There are several meanings in that phrase that one might allow to see the light. Woman as sexual object holds the look in the sense of receiving it, being its target: holding might also imply a kind of entertaining (enter-tain literally means 'holding between, from Latin *inter*, between and *tenire* to hold), and thereby a kind of stabilising, or preserving. But if the woman keeps the look safe, or indemnifies it, holding the look may also imply a kind of captivation and control. In being captured by the look, the woman as the privileged object of the gaze

may captivate the looker. Here we see an intimation of the extraordinary reversal that stories or scenarios of visual assault can enact or imply. Your piercing and appropriative gaze can objectify me, but once out in the open, you can also be exposed in and by your gaze: your gaze is exactly what can subject you to capture or catch you out. Such inversion does not necessarily or automatically happen, but the potential for such inversion is universally in play. If am being looked at, I must be able to see myself being looked at; if I am looking, I must be able to imagine being seen looking.

Here you must excuse a little interlude on the extraordinary success of this word 'gaze' – as in the 'male gaze', and derivatives like the 'colonial gaze' – may be of use. For this is a distinctively odd word to use of a mode of desirous looking that is intended to suggest assault. A word like stare, or leer, or glare, or ogle, or inspect, might seem much better suited to characterise the sharply aggressive or predatory nature of this mode of looking. The word that Sartre uses is *regard*, which cannot be carried across into English in any simple fashion. The word 'gaze', by striking contrast, tends to be used of visual actions in which one is immersed in or captivated by the object of one's gaze: the one who gazes is not inspecting, examining or coolly perusing, but characteristically lost in wonder, longing, adoration or amazement. Gazing is indeed affected phonesthetically by the z-words to which I managed to devote an entire chapter in my book *Beyond Words*, with their suggestions of the hazy, the crazy, and the woozily half-entranced. The one who gazes does not swallow up the object of their gaze, but is rather swallowed up by it, or even by their gazing itself. What is more, the gazer, like the gawper, seems in a specific way exposed to view, like Sartre's panting keyhole-lecher, themselves a spectacle. You gaze with wide eyes, as we say, a wideness that exposes your gazing to view. In other words, although we may dutifully repeat the lesson that the holder or wielder of

the gaze crassly and cruelly objectifies, they are also liable to objectification themselves.

If it is true that women are represented in the form of dolls, statues, effigies or automata, petrified by the ravaging force of male desire, and in order to allow for its attentions, then it is also true that such figures can easily themselves become figurings or effigies of male desire, the male drive to objectify itself becoming objectified, turning the gazer into a guy or object of mockery. Let us again remind ourselves what Laura Mulvey says, that the woman 'signifies male desire'. How can this be: how can the object of a desire signify the desiring itself? Well by making a visible object of that desire, by objectifying the objectification that that desire is said to want to effect. 'You want to look at me: let me show you exactly what your wanting-to-look looks like'.

I unfold this argument at considerably greater length in an essay on my website called [Guys and Dolls](#). The pleasure harvested repeatedly from exposures and denunciations of the workings of the male gaze is the gotcha pleasure of putting the gazer in the stocks or centre stage. In the story of Lady Godiva, it is peeping Tom who is singled out for scorn and finger-pointing contempt, like Sartre's peeper at the keyhole, suddenly thrust into shame by being caught looking, and thereby being made to see themselves seeing. In the classical story of the Medusa, it is not the prettified object of the gaze that is thereby petrified, but rather the one who looks who risks being turned to stone. The protest march known as the Slut Walk, designed as a protest against legal judgements that found woman who were the victims of sexual assaults partly responsible for provoking them through their dress or demeanour, is both a defiant act of self-display, and also an ambush for the gazer – indeed more than that, since the display seems aimed at removing any possibility of any other kind of gaze than a predatory or appropriative one,

making impossible any kind of neutral, amicably acknowledging or non-appropriative look. The exhibition demands the very mode of looking that it countermands. I alluded in my lecture 'What is Visual Culture' to the interplay between exhibition and inhibition that alternate in any organisation of the field of visibility: things that are licensed or offered up for view, and things that are sheltered or concealed from it. In appearances such as these, highly characteristic of course of modes of look-at-the-goods-but-don't-touch sexual display in animal behaviours as well as human, exhibition and inhibition are compounded occultly and indissociably with each other. This is why certain kinds of exposure can indeed act as concealment. Roland Barthes provides an analysis of the kind of self-immunising exposure that is at work in striptease dance, which is

the last barrier, and the most efficient of all: the dance, consisting of ritual gestures which have been seen a thousand times, acts on movements as a cosmetic, it hides nudity, and smothers the spectacle under a glaze of superfluous yet essential gestures, for the act of becoming bare is here relegated to the rank of parasitical operations carried out in an improbable background. Thus we see the professionals of striptease wrap themselves in the miraculous ease which constantly clothes them, makes them remote, gives them the icy indifference of skilful practitioners, haughtily taking refuge in the sureness of their technique: their science clothes them like a garment. (Barthes 1984, 85-6)

If I can be sure that you not only see me, but see me *as* something, then that gives me a hide-away from your inspection. (It is an intriguing thought that a hide is another word for the skin, the same as German *Haut*.) The flagrant exhibition of the self can be a pseudo-

surrender that gives nothing away, but rather extorts. In exhibitions of this kind, showing becomes a kind of management or supervision of the look of another. It may feel as though my gimlet gaze is boring through your very being, but it may always also be that that gaze is what makes it possible for you, as we say, to see through me. As anybody knows who has felt the sensation of being uncomfortably skewered by the way somebody squirms under our gaze, or declines to resist it, such that, as we may say, we do not know where to look, there can be persecution in prostration.

Diana and Actaeon

I don't think it should be a surprise that visual images and imagings should, more often than one might expect, seem to make these inversions visible. It may be useful to draw together some of what I have been proposing by spending some time looking at Titian's 1559 rendering in the National Gallery of one of the most celebrated scenes of culpable male looking, in the story of Diana and Acteon.

The first account of the story of Diana (Artemis in Greek) and Actaeon that we know is in the *Hymns* of Callimachus from around 300 BC, though the version that is most familiar is that given by Ovid in Book 3 of his *Metamorphoses*, from around 8 CE. In earlier allusions to the story, the hunter Actaeon is commonly said to have been punished for his hubristic presumption of the possibility of marriage with the goddess. Ovid, by contrast, has Actaeon stumble upon the goddess, bathing in the heat of the day surrounded by her nymphs. Ovid says he comes, not intent on claiming her favours, but *per nemus ignotum non certis passibus errans*, 'wandering through unknown woods with uncertain steps' (Ovid 1977, 136, 137). In Ovid, the grove is described as a cave, in a valley *piceis et acuta densa cupressu* (Ovid 1977, 134), rendered by Arthur

Golding in his 1567 translation as ‘a valley thicke/With Pinaple and Cipresse trees that armed be with pricke’ (Ovid 1567, 32). In Titian’s painting, the women are scarcely hidden at all, protected only what seems to be a bit of cloth on a washing-line.



In the scene painted by Titian, Diana looks back at Actaeon, in what may be described as a kind of menacing coyness, her raised arm both defending her honour, though not with much conviction or effectiveness, and allowing for her to stare back over the top of it, as though drawing a bead on Actaeon. Ovid writes that *in latus obliquum tamen adstitit oraque retro/flexit et, ut vellet promptas habuisse sagittas* – ‘she stood turning aside a little and cast back her gaze; as though she would fain have had her arrows ready’ (Ovid 1977, 136, 137). And indeed, Titian plainly would have us imagine her flexing her own body into

the form of a bow. In fact, the painting gives us a number of rhyming crescent forms that seem to emphasise this suggestion of the drawn bow, including the curve of the red fabric to the left of the painting, the right arm of the nymph closest to Actaeon, and the curve of the hem draped over the shoulder of the dark-skinned nymph at the far right of the painting. Nearly all of these bows are drawn on Actaeon, including that formed between the left and right hands of Actaeon though his seeming effort to fend off her gaze, which seems to form a kind of reverse bow, aimed at himself. These bows are echoed in the crescent moon which is prominent in Diana's headdress, which reminds us of the association of Diana and Artemis with the moon (whose light is all reflected from the sun). Indeed the painting is filled with sinister-seductive glints and scintillations. But the upward angle of the horns of the crescent moon also serve mockingly to prefigure what is about to happen to Actaeon in punishment of his effrontery, alerting us to the ominous stag's skull mounted on the pillar to the right of Diana. For Diana, with no arrows to hand, splashes Actaeon with water from the pool, which has the effect of causing stag's horns to start from his head; when he flees, he is savagely pursued and finally torn apart by his own hounds. Everything seems designed to display the danger of looking, and the lethal threat of being caught looking by what may look back at you.

Ovid calls Diana 'Titania', which is of course the name of the fairy queen in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, though in this play it is Oberon who has the power of controlling the gaze. There is also in the play another dramatisation of the vulnerability to which vision subjects one, in the magic juice that causes the one whose eyelids are rubbed with it to fall in love with the first thing their eyes light on, with Titania falling in love with Bottom, who has been semi-transformed, not into a stag but an ass.

So, if seeing is powerful, or embodies a desire for power, there are also many ways in which power inheres in being seen. There are, that is, two different ways of commanding the gaze, from opposite ends. If at the end of the one-hour traffic of this lecture is that for a social being like a human, being objectified, made into an object for another, is not in fact a kind of rape or petrification, or not only and always that, but also the very thing that gives you life and secures your being, then it will be enough. If that is all you know, it may well be all you need to know. For it will open up the field of relational visibility, enabling you not to see new things exactly, but to name the things you anyway cannot but see and cannot help but have seen, even though they may so routinely pass beneath notice. There are always lines of sight to be seen, and much art-historical attention can productively be directed at the ways in which the objects of vision in paintings may themselves be subjects of vision in the eyebeams they direct at others. But this is not just a matter of geometry, or a two-dimensional criss-cross of vectors, because human seeing is always also a matter of suppositions as well as positions and oppositions; enclosures and enfoldings; allusions, implications and inversions; reflexive vicariances, or substitutions of perspective. The very fact, regarding which I laid down my little law at the beginning of this lecture, that vision mandates distance, means that vision is division. If there is divisibility between the looker and the looked at, there must always also be internal division: that the looker and the looked at must always also be divisible by themselves. This is because of the conditions by which we are internally constituted by visual relations, unable not to be able to see ourselves looking, and being seen, as well as externally deploying them,

The promiscuous reversibility of subject and object in relations of sexual looking is not of course the complete picture. But perhaps anything that looks like

completeness in the way we picture sexual looking is likely to be missing or omitting something.

Pleasure

You would be justified for example in thinking that one of the things that may have been left out or passed over in this lecture, which advertises itself alluringly as a discussion of vision and sexuality, is the question of pleasure. What soothes, allures, arouses, amuses, satisfies, in all of this?

When it comes to questions of pleasure, visual or otherwise, it would be a mistake to forget another principle of inversion, namely the relation between desire and what refuses, delays or impedes it. It may seem straightforward to say that what we want is to get what we want, in sexual and in visual terms. But I seem to remember beginning this talk with the remark that 'there is always wanting and waiting implied and actuated in looking'. In this case, we probably need to take account of the fact that waiting is by no means the opposite of wanting, and that sometimes what we want may very well be: to be made to wait for what we want. Indeed, it has sometimes been suggested that there is no desire without obstacle or impediment. The distance that allows for power is also what stands in its way. So the exercise or exhibition of power may need to include some measure or manner of inhibition, something that says no.

For Laura Mulvey, or the all-or-nothing model of phallic looking attributed to her, it is clear that pleasure is concentrated at the subjective end of the telescope and displeasure at the other, abject, object end. But perhaps it would be better to think of this as the cathode of a battery, from which current flows, to the anode.

I cannot help thinking that the pleasure, like the look, is of a diffusive, deflective or distributive kind, in a way that seems to be particularly the case in social and sexual relations, though by no means exclusive to them. This is not a bit to say that there is no possibility of ingrained or conventionalised asymmetry, exploitation or oppression in such relations. But it is to suggest that if we ask, where the pleasure is in looking, not least if we set up for ourselves a little theatre of theory in which to stage scenarios of looking, we may have to answer with a variant of the reply given by the dying Mrs Gradgrind in *Hard Times*, when asked whether she is in pain:

‘I think there's a pain somewhere in the room,’ said Mrs. Gradgrind, ‘but I couldn't positively say that I have got it.’

After this strange speech, she lay silent for some time. (Dickens 2003, 193).

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