The Gaze as constituent and annihilator

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Abstract
This article aims to join the contemporary effort to promote a psychoanalytic renaissance within cinema studies, post Post-Theory. In trying to shake off the burden of the 1970s film theory's distortion of the Lacanian Gaze, rejuvenating it with the strength of the Real and fusing it with Freudian thoughts on the uncanny, hopefully this new dawn can be reached. I aspire to conceptualize the Gaze in a straightforward manner. This in order to obtain an instrument for the identification of certain strategies within the filmic realm aimed at depicting the subjective destabilizing of diegetic characters as well as thwarting techniques directed at the spectorial subject. In setting this capricious Gaze against the uncanny phenomena described by Freud, we find that these two ideas easily intertwine into a draft description of a powerful, potentially reconstitutive force worth being highlighted.

Keywords: the Real; subjecthood; Inland Empire; absent presence; present absence; mirror; the uncanny; Dust Devil; Lacan; Freud

Theories about the Gaze in psychoanalytic film theory are ridden with misinterpretations and burdened by some 40 years of fierce debates. In the following pages, my aim is to try and show just how dynamic and powerful a conceptualization of the Lacanian Gaze is. This aspect of Lacanian theory proves to make up an extraordinarily important part of the subject's constitution at the same time as it reminds us of the frailty of, and dangers with, the individual's pursuit of (ideological) stability. In the exquisite article Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes, Todd McGowan highlights the misconstruction of the classic troop of psychoanalytic film scholars, embodied in Baudry, Metz, and Mulvey, that rests upon a severe misinterpretation of the Gaze as associated with mastery.1 What is pointed out by McGowan is the omission of vital parts of Lacan’s thought on account of the Screen-era theorists. Lacan divides the unconscious into a triad consisting of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. In psychoanalytic film theory’s prior focus on the Imaginary order (manifested in the mirror phase) and the onset of the Symbolic order (in conjunction with language and culture), the formalizations of the Gaze have overseen the third and pivotal sphere of Lacanian thought regarding the Gaze, namely the register of the Real.2

Efforts have been made to illuminate Lacan’s theorization on the Real to amend the faulty conception of the Gaze also by other renowned theorists such as Slavoj Žižek. The key to a stalwart...
theorist of film lies in the introduction (to cinema studies) of the Real as the impossible space outside language, that which resists all endeavors of symbolization, beyond the Symbolic and the Imaginary, past our constructed reality.³

In The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, Lacan tells us a story from his youth when he, as a young intellectual, indulged in practical enterprises in a rural part of France, such as fishing. One day a fisherman called his attention to a sparkling object in the water:

It was a small can, a sardine can. It floated there in the sun, a witness to the canning industry, which we, in fact, were supposed to supply. It glittered in the sun. And Petit-Jean said to me — You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn’t see you! [...] To begin with, if what Petit-Jean said to me, namely, that the can did not see me, had any meaning, it was because in a sense, it was looking at me, all the same. It was looking at me at the level of the point of light, the point at which everything that looks at me is situated — and I am not speaking metaphorically. [...] This is something that introduces [...] the depth of field, with all its ambiguity and variability, which is in no way mastered by me. It is rather it that grasps me, solicits me at every moment, and makes of the landscape something other than a landscape [...].⁴

The Gaze is in fact a force encountering the subject from the object’s point of view. It is not, as usually (mis)understood, the subject’s gaze towards an object but rather the point from which the object stares back at the subject. McGowan continues to describe how this Lacanian Gaze involuntarily involves the spectator in the cinematic image and provides submission rather than a look of mastery.

Lacan’s well-known example of this function must not be overlooked as it furthermore illustrates this disputed concept. It is found in Seminar XI and the case of Hans Holbein’s painting The Ambassadors (1533), which depicts two well-bred, culturally versed renaissance men surrounded by scientific instruments, globes, books, etc. Dressed in expensive clothes, they stand confidently on either side of a shelf where items of enlightenment are stacked. What at a first glance might be overlooked is a kind of distorted spot at the painting’s bottom edge, when we examine this point more thoroughly we soon discover that this anamorphic stain actually is a skull that stares at us from an initially covert position. This, to Lacan, is the point of the Gaze. What we initially thought of as a safe spectorial position has been transformed into the vulnerable position that is the actual condition of the human subject (a state one can be more or less aware/ignorant of).⁵ The cinematic experience defined as an imaginary mastery must therefore be rearticulated and given a whole new meaning. The experience we are exposed to in front of the moving images is; “[…] the site of a traumatic encounter with the Real, with the utter failure of the spectator’s seemingly safe distance and assumed mastery”.⁶ We can thus conclude that the Gaze has nothing to do with the spectator’s identification with a gaze of mastery.

Before I tie this theoretical background to the ways in which we can use the Gaze as a conceptual tool to explain how we are constituted and torn apart as subjects (via the cinema), I would like to briefly quote an example from a Clifford T. Manlove article describing the function of the traumatic encounter with the Real. The example is from Vertigo (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) when the film’s protagonist Scottie hangs from the gutter of the roof of a building:

What to a rational observer looks like an alleyway, Scottie sees as a threatening object, simultaneously approaching yet infinitely receding. Dangling helplessly in space from a gutter, Scottie comes face to face with a deadly void, the incarnation of the Lacanian real. Ordinarily, Scottie would not be troubled by viewing great heights. An accident, however, causes Scottie to feel the presence of something he has never seen in heights before. Scottie now sees death where his eyes merely see the alley. This is a result of the split between the eye and the gaze.⁷

I believe this passage illustrates the traumatic encounter with that of the Real in a demonstrative way. We can all relate to this kind of visual contingency which shakes us to the core and leaves us dazzled by our inability to see that which has such a subversive power on us; when one is confronted with this split in the scopic field, the crack within the Symbolic, and the Imaginary order exposes the impossibility of the Real.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE GAZE

So, what effect does this Gaze of the object have on the spectator-subject? And how can we use the
Gaze as a concept to explain the way in which the diegetic world is capable of threatening our subjecthood? What is starting to become clear is that Lacan on a metapsychological level has defined an upholding function of the human psyche with his thoughts on the Gaze. Is it not true that our most important spatial bearings consist of different kinds of coordinates coming from points from outside the body? As we walk through life, our eyes are directed against the outside environment, but this look is only one of the tools we use to position ourselves in space. There is a second disembodied look that we use as a supplement to the purely physical, extrovert look our eyes provide. This is the Gaze of Lacan, originating from the Real beyond our constructed reality. “[...] I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides.”8 This description of the Gaze elucidates the function of manageable levels of a positioning, constituting look that maintains the dichotomous relationship between inside and outside that subjects so desperately depend on (that are not necessarily of an ideological nature).

Living in a world of global capitalism, we are the subjects of constant ideological pressure which creates and defines us as functioning and appropriate citizens within the very structure that grants our lives symbolical meaning. A life within the symbolic order of the big Other is a given for most of us but it is still an arbitrary, wide-meshed human construct. And it is within the gaps of this system that the Gaze manifests itself and provides the chance or risk (depending on one’s outlook) of a traumatic encounter with the Real.9 Nevertheless, I want to draw attention to the fact that this ideologically untamed Gaze is a necessity for the constitution of our subjecthood (both within and outside of ideology), a kind of glue that is needed to keep us together and not just this scary, sinister point from which an evil eye is scrutinizing us and tearing our social context apart, even though this aspect of its inherent force is what will be the focal point of this text.

As mentioned above it is clear that theorists of film have addressed this issue. Slavoj Žižek speaks of paranoia as an accompanying factor of the Gaze; the notion of an omnipresent eye that fixates the subject, which is contained in a kind of excess in the visual sphere that escapes the eye (see Manlove’s example above). Žižek illustrates this phenomenon with the use of a Lacanian quote: “[...] you can never see me at the point from which I gaze at you”.10

For the Gaze to be a useful concept though, we must focus on its varying presence, the envision of the Gaze of the Real constantly targeting us is, according to Lacan, a fact, but contrary to what the example above suggest, it is hard to believe that the knowledge of our exposure to this Gaze only could generate disruption or negative emotions. If we place the Gaze and its traumatizing potential on a scale, we see that a kind of acceptance of the eye of the Real has rendered it an everyday experience, provided that its presence is at a “normal” level. This Gaze is not only domesticated but has become an equally important part of our spatial orientation as our own eyes. In the field of the visual, the Gaze bestows upon us our sense of unity in space (independent of symbolic ideology), along with and beyond the functions of the Imaginary order, that is, even beyond ideology’s failure. To perceive itself as a closed unit is a necessity for the (western) subject in its encounter with the world. The Imaginary and the Symbolic provides us with an identity and a (constructed) reality but that does not preclude that we need not additional coordinates to underpin ourselves and define our existence. What better way to convince oneself of the subject’s separate status and dichotomous relation to that which is outside than the idea of subtle glances directed at the ego? These coordinates are provided by the Gaze, constantly directed against us from without. (“The gaze I encounter [...] is, not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other.”)11

If this Gaze is a constitutive and necessary part of the subject’s existence, how do we incorporate it in cinema studies in a fruitful way? If the Gaze is ubiquitous in our everyday lives and, consequently, in the cinematic representation as well since it captures what is in front of the camera, where then are the benefits of this conceptual Gaze? In part, of course, in the mapping of the points at which the Gaze becomes so overwhelming, it no longer constitutes the subjects of the cinematic or those of the real spectorial world, but instead is tearing them to pieces. Bert Olivier offers a neat and enlightening discussion about the Lacanian Real and its significance for the subject’s identification. He reminds us of how Lacan describes the encounter with the Real as traumatic,
a missed meeting, reminiscent of the way in which it is impossible to pin down exactly what constitutes the disturbing power of a car crash (beyond the purely physical means). What is easy to note, however, is the transformative power a traumatic event has, and when it comes to the ability to change the victimized subject’s constitution, no aspect of the inner landscape is safe from its impact. Just as the Gaze may comprise an overly strong presence in our lives and undermine our subjecthood’s constitution, there are strands of this unmanageable presence of the Gaze in the cinematic world as well, consciously designed or unconsciously inserted. And it is this heightened Gaze which makes for a number of horrifying movie experiences, a Gaze no longer constituting but annihilating.

Let us have a look at Inland Empire (David Lynch, 2006) for some examples. In the categorization of Todd McGowan, Lynch represents the cinema of intersection. This cinema brings desire (where the gaze is absent) and fantasy (where the gaze is a distorting presence) to the same film whilst holding the realms separated (unlike mainstream Hollywood cinema) to engineer the collision of the two. “In the moment of collision or intersection, these films produce a direct experience of the gaze: as spectators, we encounter an object that does not fit within the filmic field of representation and yet by that very fact indicates our involvement in that field.” In a couple of scenes in this film, an unmanageably overwhelming Gaze is directed toward the cinematic subjects within the diegetic realm to highlight and clarify the point when the characters’ subjecthoods dis-integrate and are reconfigured on account of the encounter with the Real.

This ideologically unconventional and disorienting movie tells the story of a doomed film project and the actress who suffers its curse. Telling “in fiction-fiction” from the story’s diegetic world soon becomes an overwhelming task. What is clear though is the fact that the subjecthood of Nikki Grace (played by Laura Dern) becomes increasingly indefinable and enmeshed with that of her role in the cursed film. After several mind altering hardships, a short scene (that to me is one of the few unequivocal moments of the movie) provides the perfect example of the power of the Real. The way in which Lynch conveys this traumatic subjective break is through a beam of light (from something reminiscent of a searchlight) directed toward a screaming Nikki. During the short duration of this slow-motion scene, Nikki is running on a garden path toward the camera with her face distorted by fear, only for the rate of the slow motion to pick up at the very end producing a culmination of the trauma conveyed. This use of a kind of strong, non-diegetic light source directed at the character in the film’s diegetic world must be seen as a perfect example of the overwhelming, erasing, near-blurring characteristics of an unmanageable Lacanian Gaze. This particular technique of highlighting a subjective break within the diegetic space is also used when the character known as Phantom is shot by Nikki, as if to mark the devastating, yet in a sense transcendent, traumatic impact on the both of them; the Phantom in death, whose face is almost entirely whitened out by the searchlight device, and Nikki in her lifting of the polish film’s curse. However, the explicit staging of the Gaze in the form of a blinding beam of light finds its implicit counterpart in the same film.

This more low-key Gaze excels, however, by a greater extent than the above example to make its fateful presence felt. The scene that produces this presence takes place when Laura Dern’s character opens the door to a backdrop and enters into a sparsely furnished stage room in search of a hiding place from an actor colleague. The danger of being discovered is effectively avoided by the set wall; the film’s male lead gives up his search. What is remarkable is the malaise that a dark doorway in the stage-left corner generates. No indication of a threatening presence has been made, Nikki stands by the backdrop window looking at her colleague leaving the set, but the only thing we as an audience are able to focus on and cannot take our eyes off is the gaping doorway and its unsettling darkness. Why? Not because of a stinger-type fear rooted in the anticipation of a monster attack (or that of her actor colleague) from within the shadows, but on the contrary as a result of the fact we know that there is nothing in the darkness. Just an eerie, powerful look from a point whose position we cannot possibly specify, this is precisely the kind of fearsome disembodied eye Lacan speaks about, namely the Gaze. Fearsome due to its proximity and the fact that it is the point at which the spectator gets included in the ideological hole manifested by the Gaze of the Real.
It is this unmanageable dose of the Real that temporarily change the subject’s constitution and traps it in a horrible world that consists only in being seen (and via this arrangement the subject simultaneously is given the ability to see for itself what it usually opts out). This is the traumatic encounter with the Real. An overdose of what is actually a necessary part of the subject’s structure. “Normal” levels of the Gaze contributes to a presence that helps us to maintain our subjects’ self-contained units in space, but when the concentration of the Gaze reaches unusually high levels (as in the case of Holbein’s skull or Lynch’s gaping doorway), the possibility of a traumatic reconstitution of the subject is opened up (see Oliver’s example with the car crash above). Consequently, it is a big difference in supporting one’s subject with the help of vaguely perceived gazes and to be reduced to the object of the Gaze, neither the diegetic nor the real life subjects are guaranteed any stability. An absent presence (vague gazes) is quite different from a present absence (the horrifying, unmanageable Gaze).

McGowan and Manlove are correct in their reading of Lacan’s Gaze as the point where domination and power is lost. The Gaze can be manifested in something as trivial as a face, but can be found, in different degrees, everywhere. To localize these charged cinematic nodes is valuable for the investigation and clarification of why some visual arrangements entail a traumatic sensation (more so than others). To give the concept a film theoretical punch, we need to focus on how films are working to increase our awareness of the Gaze (to ideologically and psychologically unmanageable levels) and dissect the ways in which these strategies are directed both toward the diegetic characters and us as spectators. This important work is undertaken in Todd McGowan’s accessible work but nonetheless needs further development. If the imaginary forces have the power to get the spectator to overlook the Symbolic order (as contended by Metz), then the Real has the power to eliminate all of our constructed reality (the Imaginary and the Symbolic).16

In conclusion, let us return to Maria Scott’s cease on the anamorphic skull in The Ambassadors: “[…] elements within the optical field must be repressed [manageable] if clear vision is to be enabled [and the experience of an intact subject/ideology sustained]”.17

LACAN’S GAZE IN FREUD’S MIRROR

In 1919, Freud published his influential essay Das Unheimliche where he describes the double’s origin as a product of the primordial narcissism, a period that takes place during early childhood, characterized by boundless self-love, when the child’s ego becomes aware of the inevitability of death. This existential distress can be solved by the act of the ego creating a copy of itself, a look-alike as a psychic insurance against the imminent danger facing the subject in death. When this phase of development of the individual has had its day and the individual is again faced with a double (in real life or in fiction), this brings to mind what it once protected against, namely death.18

Worth mentioning are the German words heimlich (belonging to the house, familiar) and unheimlich (not belonging to the house, unfamiliar), which partially constitutes the definition of the experience as such (see footnote for the plethora of additional translations and nuances of the words).19 The understanding of the dichotomy above is important in that it illustrates the uncanny as phenomenon.

I remember how I at an early age could lose myself totally in the reflection of the bathroom mirror. The person who was projected before my eyes was, of course, I. This I knew but still I could not recognize the face in the mirror. It was as if a stranger had stolen my face and now wore it like a mask while looking at his reflection as if to see whether or not he could still recognize himself.

And I was that stranger, wearing my own face as mask. This extremely traumatic experience caused me to run out of the bathroom in search of mother or father, a familiar face to mirror myself in. In my parents’ faces, I found bearing back to my own experiences at the mirror. In Freud’s concept of das Unheimliche, I find an answer relevant to my own experiences at the mirror. In Freud’s concept of das Unheimliche, I find an answer relevant to my own experiences at the mirror. In Freud’s concept of das Unheimliche, I find an answer relevant to my own experiences at the mirror. In Freud’s concept of das Unheimliche, I find an answer relevant to my own experiences at the mirror. In Freud’s concept of das Unheimliche, I find an answer relevant to my own experiences at the mirror. In Freud’s concept of das Unheimliche, I find an answer relevant to my own experiences at the mirror.
when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes [my emphasis] [...].20

That which is inside of me when I find myself in front of the mirror (TV or movie screen) “belongs to the house”, I am master of my own house (i.e. my subject). What I see in the mirror/representation is this familiar environment’s exterior, that which does not “belong to the house” as it where, in other words, the unfamiliar – das Unheimliche. Despite this alienation (which has obvious connections with the Lacanian mirror stage), the fact remains: I am still facing something familiar. Freud highlights the effort of Otto Rank who coupled the internal relationship between the uncanny double and reflections in mirror images as early as 1914.21 This, obviously, does not apply to all mirror images, nor moving images in general. It may be noted though that in situations where the subject is confronted with a face and its double, be it one’s own face, and its mirror image or the cinematic representation of a fictional character and his/her double, the eerie feeling of being excluded from that which one usually is within (i.e. one’s own subject) can be elicited, what just recently was homely now has become unhomely.22

When we stand in front of the mirror face to face with our doubles, when we encounter ourselves as objects, when we are “out there”, what becomes of us as spectators of ourselves? Žižek responds by contending that we are reduced to the Gaze, meaning: what is missing in the uncanny double/the mirror image is our own gaze which in this position, sees us from outside (again following the reasoning above, from a point “not belonging to the house”).23 The theme of being robbed of one’s eyes (sight, gaze) is a recurring fear within the psychoanalytic experience.24

In the plethora of horror films available for scrutiny, one does not have to browse for long before being struck by the healthy number of thrillers and horror movies with the word “mirror” in its title (Corridor of Mirrors (1948), MirrorMask (2005), Mirrors (2008) to name a few). Grateful examples showing how the uncanny manifestation of a double coincides with Lacan’s ruthless Gaze are not hard to find. Being the focal point/object of the pure Gaze is unbearable and can have devastating effects on the self-image, a fact which makes itself evident in the twisted faces of ghosts, monsters, and their likes, appearing before the protagonists in the filmic mirrors. This overpowering Gaze correlates with the uncanny and its link with repression as put forth by Freud (and Scott above) via the definition of das Unheimliche as “[...] something that should have remained hidden and [now] has come into the open”.25

Wherein then lays the essence of the horror when the subject is reduced to the Gaze? In front of one’s own (evil) eyes while under the spell of the mirror’s reconstitutive power, we become aware of the devastating fact of our own vacuity (through the eyes of the Other). This leads us to the knowledge we as desiring subjects must never comprehend, the ideologically well-kept secret of the impossibility of the objet petit a. Lacan states that “[t]he objet a is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ” (the split between the eye and the Gaze).26 He goes on to describe that “[...] the object of desire [...] is either a phantasy that is in reality the support of desire, or a lure”.27 As subjects we desire the secret enjoyment of the Other, but the subject pursue in the Other more than the Other has to offer, the objet petit a, that is, what the Other itself lacks and also desires.28 In one sense I am the Other and the Other is me. When reduced to the vacuous Other in the configuration of my mirror image, I see myself fully aware of my own lack but at the same time as the other Other perceives me; it is in the light of this mise-en-scène (within this forced encounter with the Real) I come to realize the worst of apprehensions, that which confirms the ubiquitous nothingness; the fact of the lack found also in the Other, through the insight of the temporary obliteration of the self; or as Freud puts it “[...] one becomes co-owner of the other’s knowledge, emotions and experience”.29

I will conclude this article with a final filmic example. There is this beautiful scene in the movie Dust Devil (Richard Stanley, 1992), about half way through when the antagonist looks at himself in a bathroom mirror. In the first shot the camera is positioned behind his left shoulder so that we see his back but also his reflection in the mirror. He wipes the condensation from the mirror with...
his hand, and this is where it gets interesting, the camera jumps into a reverse shot; we now see the antagonist from the front framed by a black rectangle. In less than one second we, the viewers, understand what has happened; we are now inside the mirror watching out into the bathroom! The camera floats backward and we drift away from the reversed mirror (which is now, in fact, a window) into the black void; the night of the Real which eventually swallows all light.

One easily gets tempted to play here, with the binary opposition of the alignment of the spheres of the constructed reality and the Real. Is not this an awesome staging of the dichotomy of our ideological reality, which is that which plays out in front of our bathroom mirror, and that of the Real outside of reality on the other side of the glass? The spectator is thus positioned outside of the constructed reality and is allowed to transcend into the Gaze of the Real. That which one sees in front of the mirror is in fact that which the Gaze sees through the window from the Real (into constructed reality). This staging goes to show that one’s mirror image is the focal point of the Gaze at the same time as one transcends into that same Gaze. The question raised by this scene lingers in my mind, at which side of the mirror should I stay?

Notes

1. Todd McGowan, “Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes,” Cinema Journal 42 (2003): 27.
2. Ibid., 28.
3. Jacques Lacan, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998), 280.
4. Ibid., 95–96.
5. Ibid., 88–89.
6. McGowan, “Looking for Gaze,” 29.
7. Clifford T. Manlove, “Visual ‘Drive’ and Cinematic Narrative: Reading Gaze Theory in Lacan, Hitchcock, and Mulvey,” Cinema Journal 46 (2007): 92.
8. Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts, 72.
9. Todd McGowan, The Real Gaze. Film Theory after Lacan (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 16–17.
10. Slavoj Zizek, Enjoy Your Symptom. Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out (New York: Routledge, 2001), 127.
11. Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts, 84.
12. Bert Olivier, “That Strange Thing Called ‘Identifying’,” South African Journal of Psychology 39 (2009): 413.
13. Ibid.
14. McGowan, Real Gaze, 163.
15. Ibid.
16. Christian Metz, Psychoanalysis and Cinema. The Imaginary Signifier (London: The MacMillan Press, 1985), 3–5.
17. Maria Scott, “Lacan’s ‘Of the Gaze as Objet Petit a’ as Anamorphic Discourse,” Paragraph 31 (2008): 328.
18. Sigmund Freud, The Uncanny, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 142.
19. Ibid., 123–34.
20. Ibid., 150.
21. Ibid., 142.
22. Steven Jay Schneider et al., Horror Film and Psychoanalysis. Freud’s Worst Nightmare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 118.
23. Zizek, Enjoy Your Symptom, 126.
24. Freud, The Uncanny, 138–9.
25. Ibid., 148.
26. Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts, 103.
27. Ibid., 186.
28. McGowan, Real Gaze, 79–80.
29. Freud, The Uncanny, 141–2.