

## GAYS AND THE GAZE

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### HAMMAD AHMED

*“In the end, the complexities of lived experience, of gawking and exhibiting, sometimes feel ‘un-theorizable.’ In order to make sense of my feelings of invisibility and anonymity in France and, to some extent, throughout my life, I’d have to think not just who wields the gaze, but who wants the gaze, who wants to gaze, and how race and gender affect this desire to see and be seen.”*

While studying abroad in Paris last fall, I finally learned the value of eye contact. In that city of millions of people and grand boulevards, appearing in public is all about being seen. Caught up in the day-to-day “métro, boulot, dodo,” one has so many opportunities to go on exhibit, or steal a fleeting glimpse. The advertisements on billboards and trains only seem to encourage this voyeurism through the attractive bodies constantly on display. People-watching is a sort of municipal pastime. This could have been all well and good for me, had I not felt absolutely invisible. Even with millions of Parisians around me, practically no one, I thought, looked at me. Aside from a few matched stares in the predominantly gay Marais neighborhood, there were no mutual glimpses that I could interpret as human, let alone sexual, interest.

Part of the problem might have been that if anyone was looking, it was women—and I never noticed because I was not looking at them. It’s not likely, and since I am not prone to self-flattery, I’ll stick with my initial observation. Were Parisian men just not attracted to me? Were they attracted, but for whatever reason unwilling to look due to some dangerous significance of the stare that I was too American to understand? Was I just not looking in

the right places? And why, for the love of Edith Piaf, did I care so much? I mean, I had a boyfriend back in the states and I had both American and Parisian friends in France. Yet, the anonymity which I felt on Paris’s boulevards became not liberating, but painful, somehow, since I was never acknowledged by the gaze of another.

I marveled at the way the female American students that had come with me to Paris garnered no shortage of attention, and I wondered whether mine was a problem particular to gay men. Was it only women that got noticed in the public? Men, the common story goes, are the lookers. It is, after all, Peeping Tom and not Peeping Jane. Men are supposed to whistle and cat-call in public, while women walk demurely by. Women are the spectacle to be seen, while men are ones with the roving eyes. It is how the vast majority of little boys are socialized, and one of the ways that girls and boys are raised differently. .

But when I asked those same American girls how they felt about men’s eyes on them in the streets, they expressed discomfort. “It’s like we’re objects,” some would say. Aha, I thought. That’s a familiar concept for me—objectification through sight. It’s a theoretical concept that writers of modern cultural theory (and their feminist groupies) call *the gaze*, that particular ability of the eye to explore, know, and consume. They write that who wields the gaze and who is subject to it can tell us a lot about privilege, power, and objectification.

Or... can it? There are so many cracks in the theory: Is the gazer always in power? What about blind people? And the queer gaze? In the end, the complexities of lived experience, of gawking and exhibiting, sometimes feel “un-theorizable.” In order to make sense of my feelings of invisibility and anonymity in France and, to some extent, throughout my life, I’d have to think not just who wields the gaze, but who *wants* the gaze, who wants *to* gaze, and how race and gender affect this desire to see and be seen.

## What the Foucault?

Paris proved to be an oddly appropriate setting for my thinking about these issues since, for one reason or another, many of the influential social theories about the gaze first saw the light of day in France. In no way can I do justice to the entire Pantheon of French philosophy on this issue, but I'd like to revisit some of the notable theories if only to show that none of them have ever hit the bull's eye for me.

The famed French Freudian psychologist Jacques Lacan watched infants looking at mirrors and thought that there was a profit to be turned in writing about it. So he defined *le regard*—the gaze—as an awareness that what is looking back in the mirror at us is ourselves. Sort of a tough concept to swallow if you're still teething. But later on, he thought, the gaze develops into this sense that what we are looking at is looking back at us with an uncanny consciousness, whether it's our reflection in the mirror or a pigeon in the park. For all his perhaps underwhelming insight, he was among the first to write about the power and mystery that pure staring could encompass.

It took a little while longer for Michel Foucault, that theory queer *par excellence* and alleged lover of bondage, to write about the cruel power of the gaze. Inspired by the Victorian era prisons, hospitals, and other places of “treatment,” he described a cold, all-knowing “clinical gaze” that modern doctors use in his groundbreaking book *The Birth of the Clinic*. He writes that it is a kind of stare that confers all the power upon the doctor to know his subject and to cure that subject. So in other words, whoever wields the gaze has the ability to control and dominate the one being looked at. And this is almost certainly true of Victorian prisons at least, but I've always felt that this is a poor mirror for day-to-day life among strangers. It's worthwhile remembering how the stare *can* be frighteningly oppressive, but also important not to take this idea too far.

Which is perhaps just what some feminist scholars in the 1970s and 80s, such as Laura Mulvey, did. Building off the ideas of Foucault and Lacan, they

criticized the fact that men control the gaze, that they do all the looking and that women act as passive screens for their fantasies. They argued that images of women in the media and in pornography consistently demeaned the female form, and that men were socialized to stare at women as objects in order to control them and prevent them from talking or, well, looking back.

Were the feminists right? To an extent, yes, but less so as time has gone on. Certainly, the prevalence of men as objects-to-be-seen alongside women has increased dramatically, as exemplified in advertising and in popular culture. In fact, where I went to school, the men's water polo team—and not the women's—posted flyers of themselves all lined up wearing speedos as a gimmick, urging people to come to their games, presumably to see their sexualized bodies in action. So, at least from where I'm standing, I don't see that men are never the objects of the gaze.

Newer feminist critics have taken account of these complexities. Indeed, the question has moved out of academia and into popular culture. “The Female Gaze” <<http://the-female-gaze.blogspot.com/>> is a weblog that attempts to reverse the direction of the classically defined male gaze, for example. But what still often goes uncontested is the notion that the gaze objectifies its target and empowers its owner; in other words, watching is better than being watched. And unfortunately, most analyses focus primarily, if not solely, on heterosexual gazing between men and women.

Fortunately, there's some hope for gay men in this realm of academia. Of the few writings that talk about the queer gaze, Brian Pranger's work sheds some light on what it means to be gay and looking. He writes in *The Arena of Masculinity* that “gay men are able to subtly communicate their shared worldview by a special gaze that seems to be unique to them.” A special gaze, huh? Sounds intriguing. He continues, “Most gay men develop a canny ability to instantly discern from the returned look of another man whether or not he is gay.” Now don't we wish! Despite his valiant attempt, Pranger is a little too confident in the reliability of his sources. If it were so easy to tell who was gay, we'd never have to ask! But what's a little more concerning, at least to me, is that Pranger flattens the diversity within queer populations by referring

to a “shared worldview.” What about race, class, and all the other divisions within LGBT populations? Let’s not forget about questioning and closeted folk. It seems like Pranger is living and writing in a little exclusive world of gaydom that I’ve never entered.

Enough theory. The gay male gaze, I think, is not a singular gaze shared by all. I certainly had *no* idea where to begin when trying to identify gay men in Paris. Honestly, if I were still in the states, they would all have been gay to me. Those tight little pants, those pointy shoes, that hair done just-so—and the scarves! It just didn’t mesh with my idea of a decidedly straight man. So as a queer, South Asian-American, theory-loving male spending an academic quarter studying abroad in Paris, where did all this theory and practice put me?

Despite what Foucault might have argued, I didn’t feel that being watched would put me under a microscope, having each crevice of my exterior scanned meticulously until it became all there was of me. Perhaps, à la Lacan, I was only looking for myself in the eyes of others; but I wasn’t aiming to reduce them to reflections, I was trying to validate my own existence. And, apologies to the feminist scholars of yore, but I might have preferred being treated like a passive screen for male cat-callers over feeling like an anonymous shadow. But, the harder I tried to believe that it shouldn’t matter whether or not some guy’s gaze found me, it did. The sheer lack of eye contact and connection demoralized me after a while. Buying outlandish and eye-catching fashions could have been the answer if I weren’t the reincarnation of Ebenezer Scrooge—and I gave up on trying to feel a part of Paris.

### **Averting the gaze**

After my stay in City of Light came to a close, I returned to California for school and, almost immediately, I was shocked to feel the eyes of men again

roaming my body. My god! It was like I was living in a colony of peeping toms! And no, after my attention drought in Paris, their stares weren’t unwelcome. But it wasn’t totally sexual, either. At college, mutual glimpses occur more frequently partly because students often know each other or share assumptions about who we are—it’s hard to be perfectly anonymous on an insular campus, what with the advent of social networking websites like Facebook and Myspace.

Back at school in California, I reaffirmed the suspicion that the gaze works differently, and means differently, in varying contexts for all these reasons (density, culture, familiarity). Whereas in the Parisian metro, a mutual gaze might have foreshadowed an awkward moment or served as a sort of come-on, in college it might have initiated a conversation about the high prices of meal plans. And when a look *is* sexual on campus, it’s not quite as easy to tell as it seemed in Paris.

Given the difference in the meaning of the gaze in these two places, you’d expect me to behave differently in both settings. And you’d be right. Being invisible in Paris made me want to stare (conspicuously, even) at everyone who I found attractive, if only to see if they would react. On campus, though, things are different. As a rule of thumb, I won’t stare at conspicuously pretty (or, at least, “legally blonde” pretty) girls because I do not want to seem like the straight male jerk. It is perhaps a perk of being gay that I am not stunned by their charms. Another rule of thumb, more difficult to follow, is the no-staring-at-shirtless-men-in-the-dorm rule. I don’t care who they are, if their door is open and their chest is bare, then I won’t look at them – even if they’re looking at me. Yeah, maybe I’ll throw a glance in their direction if their back is turned, or if their gaze is reliably averted. But for some reason, I will not stare at them if they are looking back.

In the California culture that I’m familiar with, I am conscious of the power of the person who is the so-called “object of the gaze.” Roaming the hallways, it is I who feels like an object around Mr. Dorm Hunk, who regularly leaves his door open at all hours and is often typing or reading or lazily pawing at his bare torso. In my head, I’m thinking, “This guy doesn’t

need any more ego boosting. The last thing I want is for him to run off to his jock buddies and brag that he's got faggots ogling his body." Whether Mr. Dorm Hunk would really run back to his friends and giddily share such gossip, I'm not sure. It might be that my burning good looks would radically threaten that shirtless male's psyche, causing an identity crisis and making him feel powerless before my gaze. But that doesn't that sound very convincing. I just don't want to feed the fire that makes this person very obviously an avid exhibitionist.

Why can't I just enjoy it? I should be able to look, to savor with my eyes the sight that excites me because I am a man and—after all—men like to watch, right? I am aware that men make up this enormous audience with an insatiable appetite for pornography and visual pleasures. Not only is porn primarily consumed by men, but it is also primarily made for men. Even *Playgirl*, whose readership should ostensibly be female, has a fifty-percent male readership according to Mark Graff, president of Trans Digital. There's just a serious male bias when it comes to the voyeurism industry. And yet, I can't just sit back and enjoy it for at least two reasons: 1) *whose* body is on display & *when* is always conflictual and 2) my eyes don't have sex all by themselves.

## The intrusion of bodies

Let's just say, for the sake of argument, that Mr. Dorm Hunk was to send out pictures of himself to the dorm email list. I don't know that I would enjoy looking at them terribly much, at least based on my history. In the past, when people have sent me pictures of the newest *Diex du Stade* calendar or forwarded me a sexy picture of a man, I've been conflicted. I'm aroused. I'm jealous. I'm curious, but I'm distracted from whatever else I was doing. Suddenly, my gaze is arrested by images I'm not sure I ever had much desire to see.

That's a part of sexuality that comes up too rarely in theory and in day-to-day talk. Even if I "desire" someone (as if complex feelings of sexuality can be summarized in the verb "desire"), I might not necessarily *want* to desire them. *The Science of Sleep* does a great job of setting up this tension. Stéphane, Gael Garcia-Bernal's character, wants to love his artistic neighbor, but spends a good deal of the time being enamored with her best friend instead. He discovers that there can be a gap between his partner of choice and the person who has his attention at a particular moment. I can sympathize with that, as I've often wanted to love the people who don't get any. Should I, then, indulge in all my wayward attractions, follow my gaze where it leads me the way that men are "supposed" to do?

I think not. Being *that* unreflective and lacking in self-doubt makes for very poor social harmony, at the least. Desire has a way of being borne from—and perpetuating—jealousy, inequality, and other social ills. But there's this lingering suspicion in my mind that I'm somehow following a road to Puritanism. I grew up in a Muslim household, more or less, where we prayed on Friday, fasted during Ramadan, and even went to Islamic camp during one particularly surreal summer between sixth and seventh grade. I was totally into the sex-is-unclean mindset until I went the way of secular gaydom around the end of high school. Some Qur'anic remnant, some residual scripture poorly interpreted might have stayed with me, however, and I find myself mistrusting my desires at times. I want to ignore or even cover up the attractive bodies of strangers, and in a way I find myself identifying with my cousins who wear the *hijab* (headscarf) for their own complex reasons.

But even beyond the remnants of religiosity, there's this intrusiveness of the sexual object that still perplexes me. That is, the gaze can be forcibly drawn—away from this essay I'm writing, for example, and onto your desktop background of Brazilian supermodel Rafael Verga—in a way that's unwelcome. For someone married to a jealous spouse, this can be an obvious problem. But even for single people, the imperative not to be drawn like a fly to light whenever a cute stranger walks by might exist if they have other goals than simply enjoying eye candy.

I'm not saying that closing one's eyes or covering up attractive bodies is an ethical, or even an effective, strategy. Lord knows that the objects meant to conceal often acquire a spectral sexuality of their own—like lingerie or masks. What I'm arguing is that while veiling women might seem like objectifying them, the real objectification is *not giving them a choice in the matter*. When society (read: men) insist that women dress modestly, I think they are trying to transcend their own particular feelings of objectification as well.

Maybe sometimes I'd rather Mr. Dorm Hunk threw on a sweatshirt instead of laying around half-naked all the time. I'm torn, however, because he *is* enticing, after all. But I don't want to be enticed by him—not just because it's distracting and intrusive. It also has something to do with the fact that Mr. Dorm Hunk is generally a white, muscular man. Skin color and race have become less of a factor of attraction for me, but I remember wondering some years back why I was so consistently attracted to white guys. I thought that, maybe if I just tried looking at the other brownish-beige folks all around, I'd discover that I like them, too. But this didn't work when I was in the closet trying to like girls, and it only barely worked to spur my interest in non-white men.

Really, I had to be put in an environment where people of color asserted their sexuality more clearly through their image and their expression. Like a Latin dance club, or maybe a Persian wrestling match. It's not entirely possible for someone to change their sexuality—but I think it's possible for someone to discover a new part of it when they find themselves in a new context. When slowly I noticed being fond of certain “other colors” too, I became more comfortable with my sexuality. And I still resist the white Adonis sort of aesthetic, if only because I think that somehow gives away too much power. I need to retain control over my gaze in this particular arena. It's a difficult, ongoing process, but an important one.

Even though the appearance of sexualized bodies can sometimes be intrusive, it can also sometimes be welcome. Like when you go watch the Bourne movies simply because Matt Damon is cute. There is certainly a time and a place for attraction. But even then, I feel a certain level of discomfort

with my gaze. The reason that I don't always want to gaze at sexualized bodies is that my eyes can not touch. Looking at people—but not touching them—seems rather prohibitive. I've always thought that museums suck for precisely this reason. I want to touch all the exhibits! I want to touch the pots and the paintings and the spectators—and even the museum guards. I'd be much happier sometimes, I think, if I were able to close my eyes and feel my way around the mess of bodies that I lived among. There's this increased communication, this heightened intersubjectivity, when two bodies touch that just gazing simply cannot compete with.

## Looking Forward

We all struggle with our sexuality at times. Gay or straight, male or female, black, white, brown, green or fuchsia. But it's a particularly interesting puzzle, this question about how the act of looking at someone sexually can be unwelcome or desirable for either party. What gets really complicated is when we try to take control of our desire by controlling our gaze—by choosing to look away. As I've tried to discuss, and as I continue to learn in my life, there are merits to this approach. And then there are times, as in Paris, when you want to push someone just to have them look at you in the face.

I no longer wonder why some women feel objectified when men stare at them—because I realize that their experience is so vastly different from mine. They suffer from a real overdose of attention, whereas I have often wondered whether it's even safe to look at a man with any hint of interest. That difference in being able to look is a fundamental inequality between hetero society and queer society. I can understand what some feminists tried to argue when they called the gaze a weapon, even as I see that it applies very little to my experience.

Moving forward from that line of argument, I feel we should understand the gaze not always as a masculine weapon, but as one way of

initiating other kinds of sensual communication, whether sexual or not. What I come away wondering is, in the future, as images of queer people become more mainstream, and images of non-white queers become more sexualized, will we always be willing to follow our gaze because we'll be comfortable with whatever it is we're attracted to? I don't think it will be quite so linear. Self-doubt and jealousy will probably still constrain the eye's path, but I think more individuals will be able to take pleasure from their gaze and more people will take pleasure in being seen. Let's just hope we don't overdose from all that attention.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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