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GAZE AT/IS MY DESIRE

The concept of the gaze as that which structures the field of visibility functions differently in film theory and in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis. In film theory (which comprises as its object theatrical performance as well) the gaze is an element, which constitutes subject's desire; in psychoanalysis the gaze is conceived as an object of the scopic drive, which moves the subject towards its own annihilation towards the point where desire is lost. Although the first impression is that these two conceptions are incompatible, in fact they supplement each other. The scopic field is a place where desire and drive interface. Another point is that the psychoanalytical concept of the gaze is also involved in the same kind of ambiguity: the gaze of the Other belongs to the symbolical domain, and, simultaneously, gaze as *objet petit a* refers to the Real of drives. The gaze opens up the dimension of visibility at the centre of which the invisible spot or lack – the gaze as an object of drive – is located.

Performance, narrative, and sex

In standard film theory gaze have always been accorded certain gendered connotations. In classical version it is woman who usurps the field of visibility and plays an exhibitionist role. Woman is represented by her visual performance and is defined by her *looked-at-ness*. The gaze, observing this performance, usually is male: woman is an erotic object for male characters within the performance/screen story and an erotic object for the spectator within the audience. The feminine masquerade fascinates Other's (our) desire. The spectator identifies with male protagonist that represents the position of power. Although feminist critique have spent a lot of time trying to break this scheme, homosexual solutions proposed by them in fact does not change the principal double-sided structure, where one position is that of performance, and the other of narrative and control. Feminine performance causes a break in the diegesis, it is set, as L. Mulvey says, "into a no man's land". The gaze of the spectator and that of the male character, on the other hand, are neatly combined without breaking the narrative. "Hence the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man's role as the active one of advancing the story, making things happen. The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as a representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as a spectacle."

[2, 84.] As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.

The recent production of *Othello*, staged by Lithuanian director Eimuntas Nekrošius, presents a good example of this standard scheme. It is not by accident that for Desdemona's role the famous Lithuanian ballet dancer Eglė Špokaitė was invited. Director's idea was to present Desdemona's character as a plastic object, an aesthetical spectacle, which gives pleasure to our I/eye. It is not by accident that she almost does not speak, and if she does, she does it not in theatrical manner (loud, staged voice), but bubbling in unclear way. Everything she says has no meaning – all that she is, is this appearance, beautiful body: such a plasticity gives a promise of unlimited manipulations. Desdemona's little performances are not connected with the narrative, which is put in action by male characters. Her performances are "performances in itself", pure visibility which simply asks for violence and control. The central scenes of the performance consist of the acts of punishment, lengthy and repetitive actions of humiliation, violence and, finally, murder. Each scene of violence includes a spectator's gaze: his gaze metonymically substitutes ours. The "little gaze" which is invisible for the characters, but is seen by the audience, is a sort of remark to the *objet petit a*. Gaze as *objet petit a* introduces contingent, real element within the performance and breaks the sequence of diegesis. Simultaneously, the gaze itself becomes an object of our desire, it attracts and controls our gaze. [photo 1a/1b]



We see that the performance relies on the old-fashioned cliché. Violence, which according to Michel Foucault's definitions, usually is invisible and dispersed, is represented here in aesthetical forms: woman's humiliation is transformed into a sublime spectacle, in which the uncanny and the sublime coincide. Is it possible to break this scenario, the dichotomy between performance and narrative, between the feminine masquerade and male control? Why is it that precisely the feminine subject is defined by visual exposition? Why is the status of the feminine subject always seen as something exceptional? If the feminine subject is defined by the mask, the masquerade performance, it is violence-provoking by its very definition. As Žižek pointed out, "woman is simultaneously a representation, a spectacle *par excellence*, an image

intended to fascinate, to attract the gaze, *and* an enigma, the unrepresentable, that which a priori eludes the gaze." [5, 159] Woman offers her mask as *a mask*, as false pretence, in order to provoke (usually violent) search behind the mask. What if, however, as certain sorts of feminist critique suggest, this dichotomy between femininity "in itself" and femininity "for others" is itself a forced one and is part of controlling mechanism of patriarchal societies? And what femininity would consist of without this external violence? What, then, femininity "in itself" should mean? Žižek suggests that the status of feminine subject should be interpreted as a symptom of the subject: "it is precisely in so far as woman is characterized by an original "masquerade", in so far as all her features are "put on", that she is more subject than man; what ultimately characterizes the subject is this very radical contingency and artificiality of her every positive feature, that is, the fact that "she" in herself is a pure void that cannot be identified with any of these features." [5, 160–161]

Does not this definition of woman symptomatically represent the constant situation of the contemporary subject? Lacan's symbol \$, which designates the "barred subject", represents two dominant approaches to contemporary subjectivity. The first insists that the subject is a void, deprived of any positive qualifications, and the second says that the subject is "covered" by artificial, contingent features. To make it more complicated, we can say that the subject can acquire some particular features only because of this void: identification is possible only when the identity is lacking. Althusserian notion of interpellation has revealed the performative character of every identification: you identify with the proposed role, take seriously the obligatory masquerade, and at this very moment you become a subject. Judith Butler's notion of performativity, which she makes use of in her gender theory, is perfectly suitable for describing contemporary subject's condition. Masquerade is not the privilege of women, transvestites and gays: postmodern subjectivity is a masquerading one. It is impossible to detect the "inner essence" of subject or subjectivity "in itself", because the subject is nothing but such performing. This is why the contemporary subject is defined not by *cogito* or his/her capacity of seeing (I/eye), but by his/her *looked-at-ness*, his/her being "looked at in the spectacle of the world", as Maurice Merleau-Ponty have put it. Butler derives her notion of performativity from language's power "to do things with words", and tries to assert the linguistic notion of performativity. It is evident, however, that every performative act has a visual, "obvious" character, and this is the reason why the problem of visibility can not be explained without the idea of performativity.

Wang Kar Wai's film *In the Mood of Love* reveals the performative character of the contemporary subjectivity. The film breaks the illusion of coincidence between the main characters and the spectator's desire. Film characters are involved into a "passionate attachment" to their spouses, – the mysterious others, – which are not seen for the spectator. The film is constructed around the gaze of the Other, which is himself invisible – we see only so called partial objects, someone's head,

shoulder, or hand. These mysterious objects become, for the spectator, the objects of drive (partial objects), and objects of desire for film characters. Although not seen for the spectator, the gaze of the Other suspends the main characters existence: their existence is transformed into their insistence on being under the Other's gaze. Although these others disappear literally from the second part of the film, the main characters persist in performing their roles. In the standard scheme performance usually interrupts the narrative; the film *In the Mood Of Love*, on the contrary, *is* a narrative on performing, on the performative nature of very subjectivity. First they perform for the Other, then they continue to perform for each other and themselves. Their existence is transformed into a pure exposition and visibility, reflected in the mirrors, windows, and shining surfaces, [photo 2a/2b] Being constructed around the theme of the Other, the film invents three levels of the Other's otherness: the real Other (partial objects, head, hand, etc.), imaginary Other, human partner, resembling me (the theme of identical objects, the same food, etc.), and the symbolical Other. The symbolical Other is unidentifiable and inescapable, torturing with the eternal question "What does the Other want from me?" The first two levels try to invent (an impossible) comparison between what is seen and unseen; the third level reveals how the domain of vision is integrated into the field of desire. Modifying the formula *man's desire is the desire of the Other* Lacan says that "it is a question of a sort of desire *on the part of the Other*, at the end of which is the showing". [1, 115]



The visible and the invisible of violence

Here we can introduce another conception of the gaze, developed in Lacan's psychoanalysis. Lacan makes a distinction between the eye and the gaze, between the geometrical dimension of vision and the dimension of the gaze. As Alenka Zupančič have put it, "on the one hand, there is "geometrical dimension" (of vision), which enables me to constitute myself as a subject of representation, the I/eye of the cogito. On the other hand, there is "the dimension of the gaze" where the "I" turns into a *picture* under the gaze. /.../ The dichotomy between looking (at) and seeing, between the gaze and the eye, governs the logic of the scopic field." [4, 35] It follows from this double frame that the position from which the subject sees himself is not the same one from which he

looks at himself. "In the scopical field the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture." [1, 106] I see only from one point, but I am looked at from all sides. As Lacan says, "what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that – *You never look at me from the place from which I see you. Conversely, what I look at is never what I wish to see.*" [1, 103] It follows that the geometrical dimension of vision and the dimension of the gaze cannot be synchronized: "what was systematically avoided and concealed /.../, is the traumatic fact that the gaze (of the Other) precedes our seeing and our "being conscious of what we see". The anteriority of the gaze in relation to consciousness is seen as something that could be suspended and synchronized with this consciousness", – Zupančič observes, — but this synchronization always fails. [4, 47–48]

In this respect the dimension of the gaze reveals the invisible aspect of power. Charles Shepherdson observes, that once the narcissistic stage is overcome and the most "natural" and "objective" relation with the world established, it is, "paradoxically, a moment in which the most unnatural dimension of the other is manifested". "Could it be – Shepherdson asks, – that /.../ the very fact of vision, the most "natural" sensory experience, is haunted by a peculiar, invisible, and tyrannical presence, a presence that cannot be seen but that looks at us and secretly governs the movement of the body with its own malicious or uncanny intention?" [3, 78] The gaze of the Other precedes my vision, "such that it imposes my vision upon me". The gaze is continuing itself in the very act of my vision, "reducing my most active sensory exploration to a fundamental *passivity*, and indeed to the very point at which we may speak about the *annihilation of the subject*. The gaze is something to which I am *subjected*." [3, 79] Wang Kar Wai's film reveals the disastrous and invisible nature of the gaze: the film characters, in their insistence of being under the Other's gaze, move into fundamental passivity. As Shepherdson puts it, "fundamental passivity [is] not a passivity understood as the familiar opposite of "activity", but a more fundamental, more primordial passivity, on the basis of which both passivity and activity are possible." [3, 82] This fundamental passivity blurs the limits between activity and passivity, subject and object, the imaginary and the Real. The constant condition of performing for the Other's gaze ("it's only a repetition") dissolves subjective identities and disorients their desires. The title *In the Mood of Love* refers to the performative character of love leaving no illusion that there is something beyond that performing.

The two examples presented can be interpreted in the light of difference between the visible and the invisible aspects of power. In the first example, *Othello* performance, we have seen how violence is transformed into an aesthetical spectacle. It is precisely this aesthetical form which elevates the uncanny into the sublime. The second example shows, on the contrary, how the Other's gaze, itself invisible, moves the subject to its own annihilation. Here we can define the distinction between Foucault's and Lacan's notions of power. Foucault speaks about

the Panopticon as a modern form of power, which is established and persists in its functioning by means of institutions. The domain of visibility makes possible an unrestricted specter of power and control, which, – it is important to stress, – comes from the outside. Lacan, on the contrary, speaks about the experience of being under the gaze, supposed by the subject himself and which is part of subject constitution. Foucault presupposes that before or beyond the power of visibility we are subjects “for ourselves”; Lacan says that the gaze precedes the distinction of the visible and the invisible and gives a fundamental basis for subject constitution. In other words, the experience of being under the gaze is crucial for subject constitution. You might wonder, of course, how the gaze can enable simultaneously the subject constitution and its failure or annihilation? Louis Althusser supposes that the subject is constituted at the moment of interpellation as the subject identifies himself with the proposed role. Lacan’s idea is the opposite: for him the subject emerges precisely the moment as his identification fails. For Lacan the good subject is the failed subject.

Between desire and drive

If the experience of being under the gaze is crucial for the constitution of contemporary subject, we should ask, where this mysterious Other is located. Shepherdson says, that gaze introduces a dimension “that is located at the very limit of the symbolical order, in the sense that gaze marks the “limits of formalization”, the point at which the symbolic structure is incomplete. As such, the gaze belongs to the category of the Real, which is neither symbolical or imaginary, but is rather linked to the concept of lack, a concept which begins to play a new and decisive role in Lacan’s thought and presents us with the radical development in his conception of the subject.” [3, 73] It seems that the concept of the gaze introduces a gap not only into the notion of the subject, but also into the notion of the Other. Merleau-Ponty, for example, presents the gaze as something that comes from the world – not from objects of the world but from the world as a whole; in other words, Merleau-Ponty presents the gaze as something that comes from the Other. Lacan, by contrast, regards the gaze as an object, not an empirical thing but as specific form of the *objet petit a*, and more precisely as the object of the scopic drive. [3, 82] The experience of being under the gaze opens a certain lack in the structure of the Other; and in order to fill this lack the subject puts himself into the position of this lack. Lacan claims that precisely in the encounter with this lack, “the subject *makes himself an object* of another will”. “It is the subject who determines itself as object, in his encounter with the division of subjectivity. /.../ In short, in the experience of the gaze, it is the subject who identifies with the object that would make the Other complete, fading or vanishing in a sacrificial movement of identification.” [3, 84]

The concept of the gaze is therefore deeply ambiguous, and covers two different phenomena: the gaze of the Other refers to the symbolical

domain of desire, and, simultaneously, to the gaze as *objet petit a* that belongs to the Real of drive. As is well known, Lacan extended the Freudian list of drives (the 'breast', the 'feces', the 'phallus', and so on) adding to it the gaze and the voice. In this respect the gaze could be interpreted as the "object cause" of desire. In other words, it is a question of distinguishing between the order of desire in which the subject finds its life, and the pleasure of the drive in which the subject disappears. Now we can state that the gaze as it functions in film theory and the concept of gaze in psychoanalysis opens up this antithesis between the desire and drive. In film theory, we are tempted into gazing at the desire; in psychoanalysis the gaze itself becomes the object of desire. The subject identifies with the position of the gaze, it turns into gaze as *objet petit a*. The film *In the Mood of Love* indicates this ambivalent nature of the gaze: pursuing the Other's desire, film characters identify with the gaze as an object. "The experience of being under the gaze, and more precisely the satisfaction that attends it, is precisely the experience of the scopic drive, the primordial experience which is always a possibility for a subject, but one in which desire is lost." [3, 85] Gaze is a cause of desire and at the same time the stage in which desire is lost. But Lacan asks, "is there no satisfaction in being under the gaze?" Of course, there is, and it is that peculiar pleasure in which we see the fundamental mark of death which Freud insisted upon when he wrote that all the drives are death drives.

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