

Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen

Institut für Anglistik

PS: Beyond the White, Heterosexual, Able-Bodied, Cis Male Gaze

Prof. Dr. Greta Olson

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Beyond the White, Heterosexual, Able-Bodied, Cis Male Gaze

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Tambe Florence Eyong

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Introduction

I had mixed feelings when I signed in for this course, I was wondering what it would be about as the course title seemed different from what I was used to. I was not sure if it would be interesting, or as captivating as the other courses. From the title, I understood the meaning of some of the key words like White, Heterosexual, Cis and for the others, I knew their significance but trying to put a correlation between all these words was what I was puzzled about.

In our first session, we got to discuss and understand the meaning of “male gaze”. Honestly, this was the first time I got to hear about this. However, after knowing its meaning, I realized I knew what it meant, although I did not know there was a particular term used to describe what “male gaze” stands for. This term was coined by Laura Mulvey in her essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1973, published 1975). According to her, male gaze is when generally, a typical heterosexual man is considered as embodied in the audience. It is when films and other visual media tend to consider that the only audience is a heterosexual man, thereby representing women in these works as sexual objects.

This course aimed at discussing how the concept of “male gaze” is reproduced in movies, photography, films and games. It has been realized over the years that most films and movies produced invite the viewers to see through the eyes of heterosexual men. Most often, the media presents the target audience as white, male, heterosexual, cis, able - bodied men who tend to fetishize women as though they were objects, thereby ignoring any other person who does not fall under this category, such as Women, LGBTQ, the Disabled etc. I have been able to understand better what the course, titled “*Beyond the White, Heterosexual, Able-Bodied, Cis Male Gaze*”, seeks to portray - looking into other perspectives where the viewers or the opinions that count are not only those of an able-bodied, white, cis, heterosexual male. It was meant to review ideas about how this gaze could be replaced by a female, trans, queer, a black gaze or someone with a disability.

In this session, I also got to know about the Bechdel Test for the first time. I learnt that there is actually a way of evaluating the measure of representation of women in film, it was actually quite surprising. The Bechdel test is a way of evaluating whether a film or other works of fiction portrays women in a way that is sexist or characterized by gender stereotyping. To pass the Bechdel test, a work must feature at least two women, these women must talk to each other, and their conversation must concern something other than a man. This was actually very interesting to know about. In addition, I told myself I would start applying this to better appreciate the analysis of the Bechdel test.

In this same session, I got to know about the Du Vernay test - a test to assess if a movie presents substantive depictions of people of color. In this test, the audience is asked a simple question: Do the black characters and other minorities in this work 'have fully realized lives rather than serve as a scenery in white stories?'. This test was created to encourage film makers to think critically about the way black folks are represented in films, beyond their common use as props for the white characters' arcs. Most often, they will be represented as the villains, or some irrelevant characters with roles such as prostitutes, gangs, robbers, maids, servants, etc.

1. Understanding Laura Mulvey's main idea behind Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema

Reading this essay initially was not easy. I had a difficult time understanding the entire text and making sense of it. I understood that it was about how women are portrayed in films and how differently they are treated from men. I also discovered some new words and relevant contexts for their use, e.g., Phallogentric, Scopophilic pleasure and others. As such, after the class, I had to read again through the article and this time I got a better understanding and could already think of some questions to guide further reflections.

Before our discussion on the subject matter of this essay, we talked about the context of the "male gaze theory", under which we reviewed feminist media criticism (second wave feminism) and psychoanalytic criticism. We noted that though the second wave feminism

was successful in fighting for women's rights like the right to vote, and abolished political, legal and other forms of discrimination against women, it was however narrow focused on the lives of the white middle-class women, forgetting that women in different parts of the world and of different races and origins are treated differently. This led to some criticism and caused the third wave to gain more grounds as they encompassed many more intersectionality. Consequently, the feminist media criticism originated as a result of the fact that women have different positions and consume media differently – thus, there is no “one-woman position”.

Psychoanalytic criticism on its part argued that literary texts expressed the secret unconscious desires and anxieties of the author, thus, the work is a manifestation of their desires. In her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Laura Mulvey uses psychoanalytic theory as a political weapon and questions the normalization of prejudice against women in film industries. She links the notion of feminism, psychoanalysis and film theory. She shows how unconsciousness of patriarchal society has structured film forms and the movie industry. Within addition, mainly male, white, heterosexual, cis producers were part of Hollywood in the past – thus enhancing the dominant male perspective in film production. She states how humans follow a phallogentric order by accepting male dominance as a current status, thereby permitting the sexual objectification of women in films.

Mulvey shows how the white, heterosexual male gaze is the active part while the woman is the passive. The male is represented as the subject, he looks, he is the camera, his perspective is considered and mirrored while the woman is simply the erotic object of his vision. She acknowledges that films are a source of pleasure for the audience, which she identifies as scopophilia (gaining sexual pleasure and power by looking and being looked at).

Mulvey's text gave me a critical thought about the movies I often watched as a kid. Trying to fall back on this, I realized that the movie industry back then in Africa (Nollywood – The

Nigerian movie industry) portrayed the same stereotypes as the typical Hollywood film industry with regards to gender.

In Africa, Nollywood is the largest and probably the best movie industry, whether in terms of volume, annual movie films, revenue and popularity. As such, growing up as a child, I watched a lot of Nollywood movies which was like a representation of our African society. In these movies, women were generally portrayed as objects of sexual erotic gaze for men, domestic servants, and the weaker sex. They took up roles such as the perfect mothers in some, wicked mothers-in-law in others, the uncaring mothers, and the independent working-class women were shown as insubordinate wives for those that were married and most often single because they were perceived as ‘not a wife material’ - seen as women who will not be submissive to their husbands given their financial and educational independence. This was a representation of African womanhood. Girls were raised, trained and groomed to be a submissive wife and a good mother. They were raised to satisfy and please the ‘Man’. Their main goal was to please the men. This could come through being a good cook, bearing healthy children and of course, being able to cater for them. These movies all depicted this ideology.

Men, on the other hand, were often depicted to be independent, successful, and breadwinners. They were in charge and were always superior to women. Women were often portrayed in domestic and traditional roles, while the men in these films took up professional and leadership roles.

Apart from being represented in these aforementioned roles, the “male gaze” was also very dominant in the movies. Scenes where men sat in groups at work, bars or in different settings, staring at women while throwing derogatory slangs, most often mentioning her ‘physical assets’ (curves) were common. In other movies, the men determined if a woman was good based on her capacity to cook for them, clean, and submit to their authority. In these movies, the cover photos will always contain pictures of women with exposed bodies, just to appeal to the target audience - predominantly ‘male’.

A lot has changed in recent years, as female producers, script writers and directors emerge with evolving views on gender, equity, equality, social inclusion etc. Today, one can find movies where the man does not have an active role, is not the main protagonist, nor the main subject matter. A movie I found interesting and enjoyed in this regard was one called *King of Boys*, which tells the story of Alhaja Eniola Salami, a businesswoman and philanthropist with a promising political future. She is drawn into a struggle for power which tends to threaten everything around her as a result of her growing political ambitions. To come out of this on top, she is caught up in a game of trust, not knowing whom to look up to, and this leads her to ruthlessness. In this movie, the protagonist is feared and revered for her political might and not seen as a sexual object or objectified.

2. Talking about the White Male Gaze : Savannah Dodd and Andrew Jackson's The Impact of the White, Male Gaze and 'Good' photographs: The white male gaze and how we privilege ways of seeing

In this session, we talked about the White Male Gaze and its impact. It was after reading the text in preparation for this lecture that I found out about the origin of photography and the vital role of photojournalism in promoting the White Male Gaze.

The text was about the effect of the continues prioritization of the White Male Gaze and the recurrence of its visual tropes. It talked about how White photographers were selected in the 2018 Taylor Wessing Portrait Prize as finalists, though they all produced Black people's portraits as focus. In this text, the authors discussed that the origin of photography is linked to the era of positivism and that of colonialism. From the text, I learnt that the 19th century was an era of scientific knowledge, where seeing was believing, thus the camera was used as a scientific instrument for capturing a truthful representation of the World.

The text states how this belief of photography as a truthful representation of reality has validated the colonial project. During colonialism, photographs then, portrayed specific and explicit cultural ideas, justified colonialism and represented people of color in a derogatory manner, expressing Caucasian superiority. Sadly, this legacy still lives on as could sometimes be seen in 'industry professionals' and the media's description of Africa. This is clearly observed when Michael Slackman, the International Editor for the *New York Times* described this fetishized image of Africa - "an enormous patch of vibrant, intense and strategically important territory with many vital storylines, including terrorism, the scramble for resources, the global contest with China and the constant push-and-pull of democracy versus authoritarianism" (Dodd & Jackson 2020). This narrative is unfortunately still being used as a representation of Africa today. Though it has been decades after colonialism, people still presume Africa to be this way – keeping the ideology dominant.

As usual, we had a work on the text time during our session which I always look up to, as these questions and discussions most often help me understand the text better and improve

my contextualizing efforts. It enables us to have a critical thinking about the subject at hand and we often have a chance of getting different opinions and analyzing different perspectives on a particular subject. We looked at questions like: Why do the authors refer to a “White, cisgendered gaze” to describe the “dominant gaze”?; What is does this imply?; What is the colonial lens, and why does it still prevail today?; How does the authors’ argument about how African photographers perpetuate the colonial gaze feed into our earlier discussion of the opening scene from *Lost In Translation*?; and Give examples of how Blacks are alternatively represented as “in crisis” - that is, as violent, animalistic, broken or dead.

Honestly speaking, before enrolling for this mater’s course, I had never had an analytical mind or tried to reason some life issues that otherwise seemed right to everyone, beyond the status quo. I knew that there were some standards that were the ‘norm’ and anything out of these norms were considered ‘not normal’. I never had any knowledge of how things were looked from the White male gaze perspective. All I knew was based on what I studied in school, main-stream media and societal norms and values. I now realize how all these were governed by the patriarchal ideology of the male superiority and of course, promoting the white male gaze as the ‘world’s gaze’. After taking several courses on different subjects such as feminism, sex and sexuality, gender, race and racism and the present course on white heterosexual male gaze, my understanding has broadened so much.

It is funny how one can grow up thinking one has the monopoly of his/her choices and ideas but realizes that one was groomed to think that way. Things thought to be the norm, were actually standards, set for a purpose and finally adopted to be the normal standards, and anything contrary to these were seen as abnormal or non-standard and as such, were often contested.

In trying to answer some of the questions like, why the author referred to the ‘white cisgendered’ gaze as the ‘dominant gaze’ and what it implies, based on the text, one can say that this gaze has shaped how the world has been portrayed, especially via photojournalism which is considered somehow as the representation of the reality of the world. It is the gaze that dictates how the world is seen and what is considered ‘good’. Given that men and women, people of different ethnicities and sexual orientations experience and move through

the world differently, there are several different ways of seeing things, and these differences are relayed through the images that they create, the disproportionate consumption of the number of white male - created images makes one to understand the world as interpreted by the white male gaze. The preference of white male photographers and their promotion, views and ideas make this statement true.

Talking about the colonial lens, I understand it to be the fact that photography then and even now, acted and still acts as an instrument of colonialism. It justified colonization and portrayed European superiority. The representation of different people's culture was done negatively to suit the colonial ideology. Most cultures of those colonized were represented as barbaric, bad, inhuman, uncivilized, and people that needed to be tamed. This colonial legacy has continued to dictate how the world is represented today.

When one looks at the way Developing countries are presented on media today, it is evident that the colonial lens still prevails. They are presented by foreign correspondents using narratives of misery, despair, anguish, poverty, pain, hunger etc. One would rarely see a description of the rich resources and beautiful landscapes found in these countries. Meanwhile, we would hear very little news when the Developed countries are faced with some issues like war-like tribalism and uprising.

As a recapitulation from this session, after the lectures and work on text session, one understands that being a Black or an African photographer does not mean one will not perpetrate a colonial gaze. They tend to tell the same stories because they think that is what will be accepted and published. They follow the same canons to have their work published and accepted. By adhering to these canons, they replicate the same form of orientalism within their photographs and create same images which objectify and victimize just like their white colleagues (Dodd & Jackson 2019).

This session made me see photography differently. Until now, I mostly looked at photography as a representation of the truth and reality. But after this session and learning about the origin of photography, what it embodied before, its aim and how it has been

fashioned to fit a given ideology despite evolution in ideas over the years, I can say I look at photography in a different way. For me, it is no longer a true representation of reality, it is a representation from the author's view (Photographer). It is a representation from the editors and publisher's view, it is what they want to make-believe, how they want us to see things and not necessarily how things are. From now, I would not base my knowledge on what is shown but more on experience lived, real life experiences, and seek to consult different sources to confirm information.

In trying to determine what kind of gaze one aims for; I would say a pluralistic gaze is more appropriate. This is because going for a non-white gaze would still mean not taking into consideration the 'white gaze', given that people experience and move through the world differently. This would just mean doing the opposite of what the 'white gaze' stood for. On the other hand, taking a 'disobedient gaze' would not do any justice either, as this would mean taking a gaze which is contrary to what is 'accepted or considered just'. On the other hand, adapting a pluralistic gaze is an embodiment of diversity and intersectionality. It is a gaze where each and everyone can find himself/herself. It is a white gaze, black gaze, Asian gaze, male gaze, female gaze, trans or queer gaze, cis gaze, ableist gaze etc.

To answer the question on ways to break out of the 'cliché' presentation of Blacks as violent, animalistic and dead, I would suggest changing gear and focusing on the smart, intelligent, ingenious, productive Blacks. Why not show the beautiful scenery of these African nations, the rich and vast cultural diversity, mountains, landscapes, mineral riches etc. The representation of hunger, poverty, suffering, war etc., might have been true in the past, but a lot has changed over the years and those representations do not do justice to the Black and African community. Journalism must inform and update and not repeat what was once news.

3. Talking about the Malestream (male + mainstream) Gaze in Porn and looking beyond it.

I do not have much experience with regards to porn as this is highly a taboo where I come from. Growing up in a purely African and Christian setting, we are not even allowed to watch a movie that has some sensual scenes like kissing. Often, when such scenes were going on, my elder sisters and mom will ask us to leave the sitting room and go to our rooms. I remember we would peep from the holes on the door out of curiosity and just to see what was happening in our favorite shows. We were taught that kissing is wrong except for adults who were married, and so we did not have the mind to go against that.

Also, access to these adult movies was extremely difficult back then, even for the adults who got them. It had to be rented by obviously grown-ups and so, was not accessible to younger kids. However, things have changed now with the advent of social media and internet access, where anybody, big or small can easily access these movies on different platforms and websites. However, talking about Porn or watching it is still a taboo in most African homes, though the percentage of those engaging in Porn, either watching or participating in it, has increased in recent years. It is mostly still considered dirty, perverse and sinful in most African cultures and homes.

I probably watched my first porn while I was at the university. I had a friend who had some video tapes, and she watch them at night. One time, while we were at a sleep over at her room, I woke up at night and found her watching porn. At the beginning, it meant nothing to me as I thought it was an ordinary movie, but when I went to the toilet, I heard the sounds and moaning, and I found it disturbing at the time. Out of curiosity, I joined her to watch it and I remember quickly going to throw up in the bathroom. I was irritated by the view of what was going on. I am not sure about what I expected to see when I watched porn for my first time, but I was curious to watch a 'blue movie' as we called it then. I was quickly disgusted by the scenes and felt like I was the one chocking and not the lady. Those scenes didn't leave my mind that day and they were disturbing to me. After that, I did not care much about it anymore and whenever the topic of porn came up, I felt disgusted. Also bearing in mind that it was wrong to watch such movies from my religious background, I felt extremely

guilty for doing so and did not want to watch such again. Fast forward to some years later, I watched one or two of such again. Though I was not irritated this time, I still had the feeling of guilt, so I did not engage further.

Given my limited knowledge in this area, it may be difficult to give a critical view on porn. However, this course made me to see porn as an Art and a kind of culture. I never imagined Porn could be a subject of study or research. I would think of it as a means some people find to satisfy their urge, and for the actors, as a source of livelihood. This course made me understand that porn is deeper to some people, and could actually be their passion, their essence of being, their driving force just like we have those who love being doctors and teachers etc. It entails a lot. Though due to my convictions, I do not promote or advocate this, I completely respect the choices of those who do engage in porn.

Coming back to the mainstream gaze (male) in Porn, I can say that these porn movies objectify women. In these movies, women are like objects and must endure whatever is done to them by the men. Often, they will be the ones screaming and moaning while the men are often so aggressive and use degrading words on them - calling them animalistic names and smacking them. I even realized that most often, the camera would focus entirely on the women and their whole body while for the men, it would sometimes show only from their waist down. This is done in order to allow the male viewers project themselves into the scene. This mistreatment, humiliation and insult received by women is perceived as the 'normal'. It is obvious that these movies were produced to attract the male audience alone. I have the impression that Pornography promotes violence towards women. I feel that watching lots of porn movies, make some men addicted to this and they will tend to want to practice what they have been watching in the movies in real life, forgetting that Porn is staged and does not include real emotions. I also think they may equally expect more from their respective partners than these partners might be willing to give. They may expect them to be as the actors in the movies or to satisfy them the way the movies depict satisfaction. However, this is my simple analysis, from a not-so-experienced perspective, and I know my analysis may not reflect that of others.

Trying to look beyond the mainstream of male gaze porn, I got to know during this class about feminist Porn - the Ethical Porn, where the woman is not objectified and not just there to endure and please the man, but rather, plays an active role and is accorded equal rights as the male actor. It is done under a safe sex environment which emphasizes safety and mutual respect. This is opposed to the mainstream adult movie environment, where women are mostly objectified. It is common to read about women being molested and threatened in male gaze Porn-production environments.

Though my convictions do not permit me to agree to this, I applaud the efforts made to create a safe work environment for women in the Porn industry and to fight for equality in this domain. I applaud the fact that women are allowed to have a voice and to build multi-dimensional capacities, knowing that there exists an ethically safe environment where they will not be objectified and fetishized and where they will experience pleasure in what they do.

Conclusion

In summary, this course was an eye opener to me as it broadened my knowledge on some important societal aspects and educated and enlightened me on new topics. It shaped my way of seeing things and enhanced my critical thinking. It made me look at things with a different perspective, irrespective of my convictions and I appreciate the opportunity to understand the diversity of the world's beliefs and societal norms. I hope to be able to apply the knowledge I have acquired in my day-to-day life, especially in understanding the origin of information shared and mainstreamed by media, movies and films.

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