

ISSN: 0976-8165

IMPACT FACTOR 7.86

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN
ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

VOL.14 ISSUE 5 OCTOBER 2023

14 Years of Open Access

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

The Gaze: Unveiling Power Dynamics in Knowledge Production and Identity Construction

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Article History: Submitted-11/09/2023, Revised-13/10/2023, Accepted-19/10/2023, Published-31/10/2023.

Abstract:

The term 'Gaze' finds its roots in psychoanalysis, serving to depict the uneasy sensation accompanying the awareness of being observed. According to Jacques Lacan, the proponent responsible for introducing this concept into contemporary discourse, 'Gaze' is intrinsically linked to his theory of the 'mirror stage.' In this pivotal stage of development, children, upon encountering their reflection in a mirror, become cognizant of their external appearance, thereby igniting an awareness of their objectification. Lacan argues further that this realisation results in a partial loss of autonomy as the subject comes to recognise themselves as a visible object.

This paper delves into the intricacies of the 'Gaze,' exploring its multifaceted applications across various cultural discourses and theoretical frameworks. It also elucidates how the 'Gaze' operates as a conduit for the dissemination of power dynamics, wielding influence in both the domain of knowledge hegemony and the intricate balance of gender power within society.

Keywords: Power- Structure, Patriarchy, Orientalism, Psychoanalysis, Gaze, Colonization.

Introduction: Evolution of the 'Gaze' Concept

The concept of 'Gaze' has deep historical roots, tracing its origins to a mere momentary glance or glimpse—a focused, absorbed act of looking driven by curiosity, interest, pleasure, or wonder. It sheds light on numerous facets of interpersonal visual engagement. Etymologically, the term 'gaze' finds its beginnings in the period between 1350 and 1400, with its potential roots in Old Norse, where 'Gaza' denoted the act of looking.

While 'Gaze' inherently pertains to the act of perception, it does not inherently align with any singular, well-defined theoretical or critical movement or school of thought. Instead, it was Jacques Lacan who ushered this term into prominence, unveiling the intricate psychological mechanisms governing human awareness. In doing so, he stood alongside a cohort of existentialist and phenomenological thinkers, including luminaries such as Sartre, Foucault, and even Derrida.

These scholars employed the notion of 'Gaze' as a 'discourse,' employing it to foster a particular approach to analysing texts or utterances. Moreover, they interconnected this perspective with broader socio-historical and ideological contexts, thereby imbuing 'Gaze' with multifaceted significance in the realm of intellectual discourse.

I. Application in Different Cultural Discourses

The concept of the 'Gaze' has become a central and influential element in various cultural discourses, particularly in the realms of postmodern philosophy and social theory. Its emergence and development can be traced back to the 1960s when French intellectuals such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan began to explore its multifaceted implications.

1. **Medical Gaze:** Michel Foucault, in his analysis of the clinic, introduced the notion of the 'medical gaze.' This term illuminates the clinical practice of separating the patient's body from their identity, highlighting the dominance of medical knowledge in society and the power dynamics between doctors and patients. Foucault further examined the role of surveillance in disciplinary mechanisms and self-regulation, introducing concepts like *panopticism*, *power knowledge*, and *bipower* to elucidate surveillance as a tool of power. This perspective suggests that surveillance, whether real or perceived, can lead to self-regulating effects (Sturken & Cartwright).
2. **Gendered Gaze:** The 'Gaze' concept has significantly extended its scope within the realm of feminism. It addresses questions surrounding how men view women, how women perceive themselves, and how these interactions affect their surroundings. Laura Mulvey introduced the concept of the 'male gaze,' highlighting the power dynamics wherein the owner of the gaze exercises control over the observed. This reinforces male dominance and underscores the passive role often assigned to women. Mulvey argued that mainstream cinema predominantly reflects the male gaze, thereby perpetuating power imbalances. She

also suggested that women tend to internalize this perspective, viewing themselves through the eyes of men (Mulvey).

Mulvey argues for the potential emergence of a corresponding female gaze, suggesting that it can be developed by considering the male gaze as a reference point. She contends that 'the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze...' To illustrate this point, Nalini Paul references the film *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by Jean Rhys, where the character Antoinette gazes at Rochester and adorns him with a garland, portraying him as a heroic figure. Paul notes that Rochester is uncomfortable with this role being imposed on him and rejects it by removing the garland and crushing the flowers. Eva-Maria Jacobson further supports Paul's interpretation of the 'female gaze' as essentially a form of cross-identification with masculinity. This symmetry is challenging to avoid, and the only avenue for deconstruction lies in the Lacanian concept's structural framework. Despite efforts to deconstruct it, the prevailing norm has always been as John Berger articulated in his book *Ways of Seeing*: 'men look at women, and women watch themselves being looked at.'

3. **Narrative Gaze:** The 'Gaze' concept finds relevance in narrative theory or narratology, where it pertains to the 'reading position' that women are compelled to adopt. If the fictional narrator embodies a male gaze and is implicitly or explicitly gendered as male, it carries significant ideological and political implications (Jacobson).
4. **Postcolonial Gaze:** In the context of post-colonization, the 'imperial gaze' emerges as a pertinent concept. This notion involves the oppressors defining how the oppressed are seen and how they perceive themselves. E. Ann Kaplan introduced the concept of the 'imperial gaze,' which mirrors the assumption that the Western white subject holds centrality, much like the male gaze assumes the centrality of the male subject. The imperial gaze exerts authority, domination, and control over what it observes, reflecting the privileged observer's value preferences (Ashcroft et al.). Edward W. Said further developed this idea in his work on *Orientalism*, highlighting how Western discourse shaped prejudiced interpretations of the Eastern world, reinforcing stereotypes and misconceptions (Said).

The 'Gaze' concept, with its intricate implications and diverse applications, offers valuable insights into the dynamics of power, perception, and representation in various cultural discourses and theoretical frameworks. It has become an indispensable tool for analysing and understanding the complex interplay of forces in contemporary society.

II. Gaze and Production of Knowledge – Orientalism

Edward Said's seminal work on Orientalism illuminated the complex power dynamics that existed between the Western world and the Orient. He characterized this relationship as one of power and intricate dominance, encompassing political, intellectual, cultural, and moral dimensions. According to Said, this power dynamic served as the driving force behind the creation and propagation of myths and assumptions surrounding Oriental culture. It was a tool wielded by Western colonial powers to assert dominance, restructure, and control the Orient (Said, 1978).

In the process of constructing the "other" (the Orient), Europeans employed three distinct gazes, each contributing to their perception and representation of the Orient.

1. Traveler's Gaze: The Orient held a deep fascination for Europe over several centuries. As early as the 15th century, during the Renaissance, European artists depicted Moors and Turks in their works, often featuring figures adorned in Eastern attire. However, it was Napoleon Bonaparte's campaign in Ottoman-ruled Egypt that sparked a 19th-century craze for all things Oriental in Europe. This fascination provided European men with an avenue to indulge in fantasies and escapades, free from the constraints of repressive European Puritanism and Christian monogamy. The East held a unique allure for writers and artists as it represented a dual transgression of both European and Eastern taboos.

During the 19th century, French artists such as Eugène Delacroix, Jean-Léon Gérôme, and Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres were prolific in creating artworks that portrayed Islamic culture. Their works often featured alluring odalisques, highlighting both a sense of languor and a captivating visual spectacle. Additionally, Russian artist Alexander Roubtsoff drew inspiration from his travels to Tunisia, adding to the rich tapestry of Orientalist art.

This era witnessed a growing trend of artists embarking on journeys to the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. Consequently, there was an abundance of artistic depictions that portrayed

Oriental culture as exotic, vibrant, and sensuous. These artworks frequently incorporated the iconic image of "veiled women." Said underscored the significance of travel narratives in the evolution of Orientalist discourse. These texts presented a blend of perspectives, encompassing both favorable and critical comments, reflecting the artists' genuine beliefs, their experiences during their travels, and their immediate reactions to the Orient.

2. Textual Construction of the Orient: The textual construction of the Orient encompassed various forms of written material, including novels, travel books, letters, manuscripts, and documents. These texts were grounded in the assumptions that Europeans had crafted about Eastern cultures. Notably absent from these textual discourses were the voices and perspectives of the actual inhabitants of the East. These texts provided a retrospective view of the political, social, and cultural relationships and conditions that existed during the colonial era.

A specific genre of texts emerged, focusing on European encounters with non-European worlds, framing the encounter as one between civilization and non-civilization. For instance, Daniel Defoe's iconic work, "Robinson Crusoe" (1719), exemplifies this genre. In the text, the "other" is metaphorically represented by an uninhabited island, drawing a radical distinction between a civilized European (from the centre of civilization, England) and the desolation of the island. The island symbolizes not just emptiness but also wilderness and, consequently, threats. Robinson symbolizes civilization, both as an inherent quality and a transformative process that reshapes the island into civilization. In this narrative, there is room for only one civilization—the European civilization. The process of civilization takes possession of the vacant spaces, emphasizing the inherent Eurocentrism within this genre (Defoe, 1719).

Said's exploration of Orientalism reveals how the "Gaze" played a pivotal role in constructing knowledge about the Orient, perpetuating power dynamics, and reinforcing Western dominance over the East.

2.1. The Missionary Gaze and Its Role in Shaping Cultural Perceptions

The concept of the "Missionary Gaze" emerged as a significant aspect of European encounters with non-European cultures, primarily during the age of colonialism. Missionaries played a pivotal role in these encounters, with their objectives extending beyond religion to include the propagation of Western Christian civilization and European values. This gaze was instrumental

in constructing perceptions and hierarchies, establishing the "otherness" of non-European cultures, and reinforcing the superiority of Western ideals.

Historical Context: In the 15th century, Europe's identity was deeply intertwined with Christianity, equating the continent with Christian values. "Christianity" became the core value of "Europe," and this religious discourse was fundamental in shaping the perception of Western civilization. Missionaries embarked on journeys to non-European countries, driven by a mission to spread education and religion. Their efforts were closely tied to the promotion of Western Christian civilization, reinforcing the linkage between "Europe" and "Christianity." These terms not only bolstered the idea of European coherence but also demarcated a boundary between Europe and the non-European, non-Christian world. This religious perspective became a culture-specific social construct for understanding non-Western cultures, making Christianity a prototype for the study of "other religions."

Secularization of Civilization: The concept of "civilization," initially intertwined with Christianity, gradually secularized, becoming an imperialist discourse used during encounters with the New World and non-European cultures. In representations of the "Orient," Europeans positioned themselves as superior, constructing the notion of civilization around them. Europe assumed the role of a cultural entity and featured prominently as a spatial figure in various texts dealing with encounters with non-Europeans. These encounters were perceived as relations between either different civilizations or uncivilized peoples.

Civilization, in this context, was depicted as a marker of development and progress, fostering a sense of historical and universal advancement. It became a temporal concept, signifying the evolution of societies over time. This perspective reinforced the idea of Europe as the pinnacle of civilization and progress.

Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart": In Chinua Achebe's novel "Things Fall Apart," the clash of worldviews between black and white individuals is vividly portrayed. Reverend James Smith, Mr. Brown's successor, represents a different perspective—a stark black-and-white view. He openly condemns compromise and accommodation, viewing the world as a battlefield between "children of light" and "sons of darkness." His sermons emphasize this dichotomy, where black is

equated with evil. This portrayal underscores the binary extremism of Orientalism, with white Europeans viewing black natives as inferior and savage.

The novel reflects the political reality that perpetuates differences between the familiar (Europe) and the strange (the Orient). It exemplifies the Eurocentric perspective, where white Europeans are considered civilized and, thus, superior, while native Nigerians are categorized as "others," depicted as uncivilized and inferior. The missionaries, representing the white European gaze, aim to purify the clan, converting them to Christianity and, in their view, rescuing them from their primitive, mystic, and mythical beliefs.

In this context, religion serves as a tool of possession, moulding the minds and worldviews of those subjected to the missionary gaze. It reinforces the power dynamics inherent in encounters between Western and non-Western cultures, perpetuating the idea of Western superiority and the need for conversion and assimilation. The "Missionary Gaze" thus played a crucial role in shaping cultural perceptions and power structures during the colonial era. Therefore, religion worked as a possession. Its order of working lies in the possession of the mind.

2.2. The Administrative Gaze and Its Role in Colonial India

The concept of the "Administrative Gaze" is essential to understanding the colonial experience in India, particularly how British administrators perceived and interacted with the Indian landscape and its culture. This gaze revolved around the British administrators' fixation on the perceived insufficiencies of modern amenities in India, such as roads, post offices, and railways. The administrators played a pivotal role in reshaping India through developmental works, as observed by Havell, who noted that British influence had contributed to order, decency, cleanliness, and sanitation in the city (Havell, 69).

Power Dynamics and Orientalism: The Administrative Gaze is intricately connected to the broader framework of Orientalism, as elucidated by Edward Said. Orientalism serves as the institutional apparatus through which the Western world engaged with the East. It encompassed activities such as formulating assertions about the Orient, endorsing perspectives of it, delineating its characteristics, imparting knowledge about it, establishing settlements, and exerting governance (Said 2-3). In essence, Orientalism encapsulated a Western mode of supremacy, control, and

dominion over the Orient, reflective of the power dynamics inherent in the interactions between these two cultures.

Said's examination of power and knowledge, under the influence of Michel Foucault, underscores the inseparability of these two facets. Western assertions of comprehension regarding the East conferred upon the West the authority to ascribe names and wield power over the Orient. This dynamic played a pivotal role in the context of colonialism, wherein Europe harnessed Orientalism to forge a unified European identity by positioning the Orient as a homogeneous "other."

Construction of India and the "Models": India was constructed by British administrators as a place primarily known for the developmental works initiated under colonial rule. The landscape was seen as spaces to be surveyed, regulated, and sanitized, with Benares (Varanasi) serving as an epistemological space that needed to be understood to be effectively controlled (Thomas, 4). British orientalism was instrumental in delivering and shaping Indian models to represent them, particularly individuals who were Indian by birth and colour but adopted British mannerisms.

These "models" constituted a cohort of privileged individuals who played a pivotal role in propelling India towards modernization. Ranjit Guha, a proponent of "Subaltern Studies," delineated the subaltern as individuals situated outside the elite sphere. This encompassed dominant foreign entities like British colonial officials, missionaries, and industrialists. The subaltern viewpoint primarily concentrated on historical junctures in India marked by acts of rebellion and direct opposition to the prevailing dominion of the elite (Guha; Sarkar).

Epistemic Violence and Post-Colonialism: Gayatri Spivak's concept of "epistemic violence" is pertinent to understanding the impact of colonialism on non-Western ways of knowing and the subsequent domination of Western epistemologies. Spivak criticizes the subaltern perspective for neglecting the "cultural other" and argues that it is crucial to acknowledge the destruction and marginalization of non-Western ways of understanding (Spivak).

Spivak's work highlights the importance of self-criticism in Western methods and encourages exploration of alternatives offered by post-colonialism. The "gaze" functioned as a frame through which the Occident or Europe limited its view of the "Orient," underscoring the power dynamics and the complex interactions between colonial rulers and the colonized.

the Administrative Gaze played a pivotal role in shaping colonial India and was closely linked to the broader framework of Orientalism. This gaze reflected the power dynamics between the West and the Orient, contributing to the construction of India and the perpetuation of colonial hierarchies. It is through a critical examination of such gazes that we can better understand the colonial experience and its lasting impact on post-colonial societies.

III. Gaze and Totalization: A Postmodern Perspective

The concept of "gaze" and its implications in the context of totalization and subjectivity have been critically examined by scholars like Michel Foucault and Juergen Habermas. These thinkers challenged notions of objectivity and completeness in knowledge production, emphasizing the subjectivity inherent in all forms of understanding.

Foucault's Perspective: Michel Foucault introduced the idea that an author's interpretation of their work holds no special authority once it is written. In his view, the author's perspective is no more significant than that of any other reader. He argued that history must be evaluated within the context of its own time, emphasizing that historical knowledge accumulates over time (Foucault).

Foucault also highlighted the co-option of subjective experience in the service of administrative totalization. This process of subjectivization played a crucial role not only in shaping individual subjectivities but also in facilitating colonial enterprises. The trend of totalization of space aimed to survey a seemingly homogenous space in the pursuit of universal knowledge. However, it resulted in the assimilation of individual actions into a universal structure of subjectivity (Foucault).

Foucault's contributions to the understanding of gaze and totalization have had a profound impact on intellectual developments, particularly in the realm of Orientalism. His perspective has been foundational to the emergence of "postmodern anthropology," encouraging scholars to move beyond language as a tool of repression and to explore the underlying structures of society that render many linguistically and economically marginalized, or "silenced." He challenges the notion that "rational" science is the only valid ideology, emphasizing that it is merely one product of a specific worldview (Foucault).

Said's Continuation of Foucault's Legacy: Edward Said further developed Foucault's insights, particularly in the context of Orientalism. Said's key contribution lies in highlighting that Orientalism perpetuates not only falsehoods but also a specific power relation. He argued that the Western gaze upon the East served to reinforce colonial hierarchies and sustain the dominance of Western knowledge and authority over the East (Said).

However, it is important to note, as pointed out by Nader, that hegemonic culture is not solely constructed by anthropologists but is primarily shaped by global power holders. Scholars often unwittingly contribute to the perpetuation of dominant ideologies (Nader).

In summary, the examination of gaze and totalization from a postmodern perspective, as championed by Foucault and continued by Said, challenges the notions of objectivity and completeness in knowledge production. It underscores the subjective nature of understanding and the role of power dynamics in shaping not only knowledge but also the broader structures of society.

Conclusion: The Power Dynamics of the Gaze in Shaping Knowledge and Identity

In this exploration of the concept of "gaze" within various cultural discourses, we have uncovered its profound implications for the construction of knowledge and identity. The gaze, as a medium of perception, becomes a complex interplay of power dynamics, values, and subjecthood. It is through the gaze of others that we come to define and redefine ourselves, a process laden with implications for our freedom as subjects.

Jean-Paul Sartre astutely recognized the gaze as the battleground for the self's definition. When confronted with the gaze of the "Other," we become acutely aware of our existence as both subject and object. This awareness, however, is accompanied by a loss of control, as the gaze objectifies us and subjects us to external values. Sartre's assertion that we are enslaved by the values imposed upon us through the gaze underscores the inherent power dynamics at play.

The gaze, whether in the form of visual images or interpersonal interactions, possesses a commanding presence. There exists a peculiar pleasure in looking, even when looking means surrendering our agency. Much like the legendary gaze of Medusa, which turned onlookers into

stone, images hold the power to immobilize their viewers, rendering them passive recipients of constructed narratives.

Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" serves as a vivid literary example of "The Othering." Edward Said's analysis of Conrad's work reveals the dual nature of darkness – a space that can either be colonized or illuminated. The novel delves into the complexities of mission civilisation, exploring both benevolent and cruel schemes aimed at bringing light to the dark places. Conrad's narrative exemplifies how the gaze can be wielded as a tool of domination and a means of imposing Western values on foreign territories.

In the grand tapestry of Orientalism, as brilliantly articulated by Edward Said, the Orient is not a mere product of imagination but an integral component of Europe's material civilization and culture. Orientalism, as a mode of discourse, transcends the realm of ideas and extends into tangible institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, and even colonial bureaucracies. It shapes the very fabric of European knowledge and identity, underscoring the enduring power of the gaze in defining the "Other" and perpetuating hierarchies of dominance.

In conclusion, the gaze stands as a potent force in the production of knowledge and the construction of identity. Its entanglement with values, subjecthood, and power dynamics makes it a critical focal point for critical inquiry and reflection. As we navigate the multifaceted dimensions of the gaze, we are compelled to confront the implications it holds for our understanding of self and others, and the enduring legacy of knowledge it bequeaths to our collective consciousness.

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