Visual Riposte: Looking Back at the Return of the Gaze as Postcolonial Theory's Gift to Film Studies

by Paula Amad

Abstract: This article examines the theoretical and historical background of the return-of-the-gaze phenomenon in film studies and in film practice, especially within the articulation between postcolonial and visual studies, and discusses its limitations and potentialities through a case study of films made by Father Francis Aupiais in Benin in 1929–1930.

One of the most infamous indictments of cinema's role in the visual oppression of racial and, more specifically, colonial Others occurred in 1965 when the so-called father of African cinema, Ousmane Sembène, charged Jean Rouch, his counterpart in French ethnographic film, with the following crime: "Tu nous regardes comme des insectes" ("You look at us as though we were insects").[1] In making this accusation, Sembène pinned Rouch down as the direct inheritor of a visual pathology whose cinematic conception dates back to the cross between science and spectacle that characterized the chronophotographic and cinematographic encounters with French colonial Others made by figures like Félix-Louis Regnault and the Lumière brothers. It is not difficult to find examples from their work in which colonized bodies were indeed filmed as entomological or zoological specimens. The resemblance appears in the formal similarities between Regnault's 1895 studies of West Africans walking in decontextualized profile against a white backdrop (staged at the Paris Exposition Coloniale de l'Afrique Occidentale) and Étienne-Jules Marey's contemporaneous slow-motion studies of similarly abstracted insect movement, and it reappears in the Lumière film *Enfants annamites ramassent des sapèques devant la pagode des dames* (1900), in which French

1 See Albert Cervoni, "Une confrontation historique en 1965 entre Jean Rouch et Sembène Ousmane: 'Tu nous regardes comme des insectes,'" *CinémAction* 17 (1982): 77–78. All translations from the French are by the author unless otherwise noted.

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colonial women scatter coins to children in Indochina as though they were feeding rice to pigeons.[2]

In addition to implicating the history of colonial structures of seeing, Sembène's accusation reminds us that although postcolonial studies has been dominated by a literary and linguistic bias (perhaps more noticeable in the Anglophone rather than the more recent Francophone tradition), the field has also had a profound and contested impact on the broader study of visual culture. Central to the legacy of postcolonialism and postcolonial studies in the disciplines focused on visual culture—from film studies and visual anthropology to art history—has been a reinvestigation of the role of a number of visual technologies (e.g., photography, postcards, advertisements, cinema) and sites (e.g., world's fairs, zoos, natural history museums, colonial expositions) that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contributed to, reflected, or refracted the specular antagonism underpinning diverse colonial encounters. Writing in 1973, the literary critic Jacques Leenhardt (in a review of Alain Robbe-Grillet's colonial novel *La jalousie*) provided a condensed rendition of the power relations embedded in this antagonism when he argued that the colonial order was underpinned by the "morbid geometrism" of "the right to look without being looked at."[3] Two years later, in *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault would provide what has become for the domain of visual studies one of the most influential, if also keenly debated, theories of this system of viewing relations (applied to the carceral domain yet subsequently generalized to the visual regimes of modernity and modern media). At basis a visual analysis, Foucault read the architectural panopticon as a "machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring [of its structure where the prisoners reside], one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower [reserved for the watchman], one sees everything without ever being seen."[4] Panoptic surveillance came to stand for a form of looking without being looked at in which "the codified power to punish turns into a disciplinary power to observe."[5] Once literally applied to the discursive networks of actual visual machines such as photography and film, the panoptic model of disciplinary vision became debatable, in part because of the blind spot that troubles the rigid spatial binarism of Foucault's arguably unidirectional theory of vision-as-power.[6] So what exactly occurs in the shadows of this critical blind

2 On Regnault, see Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 21–73; for a fascinating reading of the Lumières' *Enfants annamites*, see Barbara Creed and Jeanette Hoorn, "Memory and History: Early Film, Colonialism, and the French Civilizing Mission in Indochina," *French History and Civilization* 4 (2011): 223–236.

3 Jacques Leenhardt, quoted in Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 76.

4 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1975; Vintage Books, 1995), 202.

5 Ibid., 187, 224.

6 For one among many critiques of the Foucauldian model of visual panopticism, see Paul S. Landau, "Empires of the Visual: Photography and Colonial Administration in Africa," in *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, ed. Paul S. Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 141–171.

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spot? Ironically, Foucault himself had demonstrated it all too well in his earlier analysis of the "pure reciprocity" of gazes in Vélasquez's painting *Las meninas* in *The Order of Things* in which "subject and object, the spectator and the model, reverse their roles to infinity."[7] In other words, in the shadow of the blind spot cast by his later more unidirectional model of power, the possibility still exists for the dissociated "see/being seen dyad" to begin reassociating, resulting in the supposedly unseeing, surveyed object morphing into subjectivity by returning the purportedly invisible gaze of the all-seeing and controlling surveillant eye. The "return of the gaze" provides a condensed phrase for the potential activity occurring once the relational and unstable dynamics of that dyad are reactivated.

In the past two decades, discussions about the disciplinary role of the visual and the question of the returned gaze within colonial regimes have been particularly influenced by new research on early cinema. The crossroads of the multifaceted, intercultural, and transnational history of returned gazes and the study of representations of race in early cinema have become critically significant for several reasons. First, nonfiction films (e.g., travelogues, actualities, quasi-ethnographic films, scientific films, promotionals), which were the dominant form of cinema before 1903, are undeniably shackled by direct and indirect evidence of colonial and racist ideology. Second, there is a radical dissimilarity of spectator-screen relations between these early nonfiction films and the type of films most suitable to an invisible-eye model of spectatorship: classical Hollywood narratives. It is now widely accepted that the gaze (of the spectator, camera, and filmed subjects) operates differently in films whose spectatorial address is less determined by the intratextual mechanisms of identification associated with classical Hollywood representation than by a diffuse set of extratextual references taking us into the realm of fairgrounds, world expositions, cartoons, and (of central importance for an understanding of the precinematic precursors to the return of the gaze) photographs. But perhaps the most important reason that early nonfiction film has attracted so much discussion regarding the return of the gaze is the most obvious: such films abound with evidence of the camera being acknowledged by the subjects filmed. As Tom Gunning has argued, early nonfiction films are commonly "marked by the returned look of the people within the film, the gaze directed out at camera and viewer which transfixes the act of looking as central" to the descriptive, exhibitionist tendencies of early cinematic representation.[8] While direct address became increasingly prohibited in fiction films during the 1910s, it continued as a dominant stylistic feature of newsreels and documentary shorts at least until the early 1930s. Even its outright rejection by radical documentarians of the 1920s—heard for example in Dziga Vertov's call to capture "life unawares" or Jean Vigo's directive for a cinema in which "conscious behavior cannot be tolerated, [and] the character must

7 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (1966; London: Routledge, 1974), 3–16, 4–5.

8 Tom Gunning, "Before Documentary: Early Nonfiction Films and the 'View' Aesthetic," in *Uncharted Territory: Essays on Early Nonfiction Film*, ed. Daan Hertogs and Nico de Klerk (Amsterdam: Netherlands Filmmuseum, 1997), 18.

be surprised by the camera"—indicates how pervasive and normative the look at the camera had become in nonfiction film during this period.[9]

What is of particular interest to me here is the manner in which studies attentive to looks at the camera often repeat a trope of what I call "visual riposte," which extends beyond formal or stylistic analysis to embody the authors' ethical intent to return, or at least to interrogate, the gaze. I began with Sembène's legendary performance of this trope, because all the examples I invoke here exist in the shadow of that monumental put-down. In what follows, I offer some reflections upon the origins, limits, and possibilities of this hermeneutic habit of visual riposte as it pertains to the study of early documentary films and in particular that subset characterized by a cross-cultural relay of gazes. I historicize the intellectual and political stakes at play in this hermeneutic by tracing it back, in part, to the influence of early postcolonial theory on Film Studies, whose unfinished implications I then bring to bear upon a body of French colonial films. Ultimately, I claim that the returned gaze is a privileged figure of representational disruption whose deployment is overdue for sustained critical reconsideration, and I ultimately suggest that, for all its drawbacks, the hermeneutic should not be abandoned but rather needs to be reformed through a more deeply contextualized and less deterministic mobilization.

This article's reconsideration of the beginning of postcolonial studies is additionally motivated by diverse proclamations of that discourse's end, as seen, for example, in *PMLA*'s 2007 roundtable "The End of Postcolonial Theory?"[10] In that particular discussion, the debate regrettably repeated the reductive criticisms that have plagued postcolonial theory since its beginnings in the late 1970s, namely that it fails to recognize and combat continuing imperialisms, to distinguish between historically and nationally distinct colonialisms, to legitimize its right to protest once safely ensconced in the academy, and to do justice to the recently acquired subjecthood of decolonized peoples by opting for the poststructuralist eradication of the subject.[11] If one were to follow the largely pessimistic terms of that debate in which theory was made to assume the guise of history's blindfold, it would be tempting to read the hermeneutic of the returned gaze as postcolonial theory's gift to film studies—an interpretive sleight of hand which (by magically restoring sight to the previously only seen objects of the Western imperial eye) allowed visual studies scholars to elide the historical and contemporary oppression of neo-colonizing regimes of vision. The analogy of the gift interests me here because of the unspoken reciprocal exchange that it demands. In other words, what Film Studies owes or must return to postcolonial studies is, to my mind, still to be satisfactorily negotiated. Thus, a secondary interest here is to ask,

9 Dziga Vertov, "The Birth of Kino-Eye" (1924), in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 41; Jean Vigo, "Towards a Social Cinema" (1930), in *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology, Volume II: 1929–1939*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 63. For a revisionist reading that describes Vertov's preference for the hidden camera as "the very negation of the gaze into the camera," and ultimately aligns it with the repressive associations of a police aesthetics, see Cristina Vatulescu, *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 85–88.

10 "The End of Postcolonial Theory?" *PMLA* (May 2007): 633–651.

11 Ibid., 633–634.

what can film studies still do for our understanding of the colonial nexus, beyond reconfirming the camera's overgeneralized complicity in the subjugation of racial others? Attempting to answer that question, I investigate a unique body of films made in Dahomey (present-day Benin) between 1929 and 1930 by the Catholic missionary Father Francis Aupiais.

Staring Down the Present. As should already be apparent, I employ the phrase "return of the gaze" in a twofold manner. It refers to evidence of the look at the camera (and by implication the camera operator and film spectator) by filmed subjects, and more generally it connotes the now-common interpretation of that look as a refusal of the assumed monolithic, unidirectionality of the West's technologically mediated structures of looking at cultural Others. There is therefore a difference in these two deployments of the term, the first referring more to the neutral evidence of subjects looking at the camera, and the second focusing on the now-conventional politicized interpretation of that look as a sort of unmediated and quasi-intentional address to the spectator. A specific photo-cinematic translation of a broader postcolonial imperative to decenter, decolonize, and provincialize any number of European imperial constructs (present as early as the now-canonical *The Empire Writes Back*), the return-of-the-gaze interpretive move is aimed at recovering resistance or at least a trace of agency for the nameless masses trapped like insects within modernity's visual archive.[12] Read less sympathetically, as suggested earlier, it might be argued that analyses dependent on the return of the gaze use it as leverage with which to historically unburden the medium of film of its entomologizing and zoologizing legacy regarding the visual representation of racial and colonial others.

The hermeneutic of visual riposte is usually aroused by unintended, momentary evidence in the filmic text—when people look back at or toward the camera—that purportedly has the effect of unbalancing cinema's dominant gaze, typically described in antivisual critiques as a distanced, voyeuristic, clinical, controlling, invisible, Orientalizing, and dehumanizing deployment of vision. This is not to say, however, that the meaning of these gazes is uniform. The diverse styles of direct address that we find in early nonfiction films solicit multiple effects and interpretations, and they confirm the profoundly ambivalent nature of this look.[13] In an oppositional guise, often accompanied by temporal intensity (staring for a long period at the camera), spatial evasion (running away from the camera), expressions of refusal (covering one's face from the camera), or performances or enactments of a threat (shaking one's fist at the camera), the returned gaze can be associated with subversion, defiance, or rebuke. Among countless others, evidence of oppositional gazes appear in the African dancer-performer gesturing mock threateningly toward the camera in the Lumières' *Danse du sabre* (1897), or the Northern English steelworker giving an "up yours" gesture to the

12 See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

13 For important treatments of diverse styles and meanings of looks at the camera in early nonfiction films and later narrative cinema, see, respectively, Alison Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 195–203; Marc Vernet, "The Look at the Camera," trans. Dana Polan, *Cinema Journal* 28, no. 2 (Winter 1989): 48–63, 53–56.