Review

KISSING EXPOSED TO THE GAZE

How concepts of transference and the semantics of photography stop Laura González in her tracks: uncovering the phenomenology of the gaze at Tate Modern’s Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera

The new exhibition at Tate Modern, Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera, is structured around five themes: the unseen photographer (with a display of divinely suppurated devices), celebrity, voyeurism, violence and surveillance. All the images in the show have something in common: they point to the fact that our involvement in the act of looking begets reflexion. Yet, it would be impossible to analyse in depth the rich connections between the photographs exhibited and psychoanalysis — for that reason I urge a visit to the show before it closes on 3 October 2010 — so, in the name of free association, I will explore the first thought I had when I engaged with these images.

A fair amount of the work captures couples in the act of kissing, an act that has both public and private dimensions. There is one by Marcello Gepetpi showing Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor on the beach, reminding us of the time when seeing the private moments of public people became a socially acceptable activity and being a paparazzo became a profession. Nan Golden’s epic The Ballad of Sexual Dependency, a slide show with images taken over 20 years, displays a few shots of her friends and acquaintances touching lips. We see a mirror reflexion of a couple kissing in bed in Brassai’s Chez Suzy, a series depicting brothel life.

Most notably, there is a series of exquisite images by a photographer named Arthur Fellig, better known as Weegee. They depict couples kissing in theatres or at the movies. Out of these, Audience in the Palace Theatre (1943) stands out. It shows the half-filled seats of the venue, in the same diagonal angle one takes when approaching the lips of one’s lover. Amongst the empty seats and the concentrating audience, a young man and woman have eyes only for each other. They are oblivious to the performance — which everyone else is watching attentively, engaged, even smiling — the people in the theatre, and the photographer, his gaze remaining unseen by his subjects. There could not be more contrast between this scene and that depicted by Garry Winogrand entitled New York, 1969, also in black and white. Here, the kissing couple is in the street, half concealed in what seems the recess in a shop. One of them is engrossed in the physicality of the act while the other, the girl, cigarette in hand, looks directly at the camera. Close to them, a third person, a girl in a dark T-shirt and white shorts, also acknowledges the photographer with her look.

Photographs depict scenes, but they are made of stuff, they are material. Yet, the shades of grey created by the silver gelatin of the photographic print, when arranged in the manner of Winogrand’s image, look at us. Moreover, I would say that the framed paper displayed at the Tate Modern addresses me directly, makes me stop in my tracks. What is it about these two images that has such an impact in me?

‘Gaze is an area of analytical impossibility and theoretical resistance.’

Gaze may help us find an answer. Jacques Lacan considered it to be one of the four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis. It is certainly present in the consulting room. When the analyst takes her place on the couch, the analyst sits behind her, out of sight. He is absent and present at the same time: the analyst cannot see him, but feels looked at. In this way, gaze plays an important part in transference, the complex relationship between analyst and analysand. But it also operates in the field of vision.

As the partial object of the scopic drive, gaze cannot be assimilated and has no representation; it is an essence-less object, an area of analytical impossibility and theoretical resistance. Lacan separated it from the concept of the look, the latter being concerned with the organ of sight and related to the subject. By extension, he placed gaze on the side of the object, in particular of Objets Petits, which is not the object to which desire is directed, but what causes desire. And desire is what is at play in the rooms at Tate Modern.

In the dialectic of the eye and the gaze, Lacan warns us that ‘there is no coincidence, but, on the contrary, a lure.’ Moreover, he establishes the pre-existence of the gaze and its lure with the phenomenological argument: ‘I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides.’ It has, thus, the function of interpolation, as it is related to the experiences of addressing and being addressed. The latter is imposed from the outside and cannot be readily defended against. For that reason, gaze can become invasive and threatening, as the section on surveillance in this exhibition shows. When the gaze of the photographer — through the camera — is made visible to the subject, the phenomenon of the pore, and its performativity, occur. This is what the girl in the dark T-shirt in Winogrand’s photograph is engaged in.

In her 1977 book On Photography, Susan Sontag wrote that photographs are pieces of the world, more than statements about it. They relate to desire and the erotic feelings aroused by unsustainability and distance. When one encounters a photograph, one encounters an object of fascination. To photograph is to participate through active observing, she argues, ‘like sexual voyeurism, it is a way of at least tactivly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep on happening.’ Photographs certify experience, but also resist engaging with it directly; they limit experience by converting it into an image. Photography has resistance embedded in its process. Moreover, it demands exclusivity, full attention, if the powers of observation of the photographer are to be improved. Photographs make us see, but, in that process, they demand that we surrender to its product. It is the ambiguity of the engagement with the experience, its tyrannical demand for attention and the resistance embedded within it, that make it an ideal form for capturing the seduction involved in kissing.

Yet, all of this refers to the status of the images — to bring about French semiotician Roland Barthes’ analysis of photography in Camera Lucida: their obvious symbolic meaning and, as such, do not explain what makes these images so compelling for me: above all the others in the show. To find that out, I must seek the punctum, that which pierces me as a viewer, provoking an unexpected emotional response. I look at Weegee’s image, intensely, without blinking, and an amorphous form to left of the kissing girl — her light coat — takes on the significance of abandonment that gives me so much pleasure in this image. If I look at some of the other photographs in his series, the punctum emerges in a blurred head in the foreground or some conical 3D type glasses worn by the audience, but not the kissers. The cigarette in Winogrand’s girl hand — I must be identifying with girls — makes me taste how the kiss must seem to the boy. These are elements of the image that are off centre, but it is in them one finds the gaze, just as in the analytic room, meaning is found in the peripheral, in the form of, for example, unintended acts or mispronounced words.

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