

BOOK REVIEW

Staring: how we look, by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, New York, Oxford University Press, 2009, 244 pp., US\$24.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-195-32680-2

I have always been a starrer. People have reminded me about this rude tendency of mine for as long as I can remember. I used to think that my staring habit is due to the fact that I grew up on a farm, and therefore, had more interaction with cows than with my human peers. As you may know, there are two activities that cows spend their time doing when they are awake: eating and staring. They rarely peek or have a look at things. Oh no, cows stare, gape, gawk, goggle, ogle. The way they stare is unsettling because they seem to be very interested in you, but at the same time, completely indifferent as well. Partly it may be due to rumination, which makes them look like American football players, and in a similar way, cool in not a cool way at all. But it is their staring that gets to you. Psychologically, you can never beat a cow in a staring competition because you just don't know whether her stare is actually vacant or keen, whether there's anybody there or not. Usually we like to assume that cows are plain stupid and that they don't *see* in any relevant sense. But if you spend enough time with them, staring back at them, troubling uncertainty may start to creep into your mind: perhaps, after all, they do see and are just extremely, maddeningly . . . arrogant.

Anyway. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has written a wonderful book. Her work represents the kind of scholarship that examines the most mundane and seemingly obvious phenomenon, but which opens with great sophistication new and useful ways to see things. *Staring: how we look* is an anatomy of staring. It reveals in detail how intense visual exchanges make meanings. Garland-Thomson's book is especially valuable to the European, mostly social scientific disability research community, due to its method, focus, style and theory that are rooted in humanities (although theoretically the book draws from numerous disciplines; from psychology to arts, from sociology to philosophy). Analyses of cultural phenomena in the light of, for instance, works of art are not completely absent in European disability studies, but they rarely manage to achieve the diversity and sophistication of Garland-Thompson's work.

Garland-Thompson first explains the physiological and psychological basics of staring, and then proceeds to analyze it as a social phenomenon. Staring is, quite simply, an ocular response to what we don't expect to see. We stare when ordinary seeing fails, when we want to know more. Physiologically, staring is a physical response to visual novelty which brings about a dopamine rush in our brain. In other words, staring is a natural physical phenomenon where our brain constantly looks for 'surprises', that is, visual thrills. This kind of stimulus-driven exploratory behaviour is promiscuous looking that is always at risk of being seduced away by

a fresher, newly stimulating sight. It is also usually considered a wrong way to look because it doesn't imply paying attention in a proper sense. To pay attention is to make staring productive and controlled by our intentions and strategies; paying attention is a form of social capital which creates and maintains coherence in respect to undisciplined visual stimuli.

Staring: how we look clarifies the primary role of vision in the modern world. Vision shapes the modern citizenry and is an essential source of information and pleasure. Staring is regulated by various social regulations, norms and functions. It is, first of all, a part of our communal vocabulary of the eyes that we use to signal what we mean, think or want. Garland-Thomson illuminates interestingly how ways of looking and staring are also connected to gender and class roles: for example, women tend to look more than men, and high status people are looked at more than low status people. At the same time, however, staring is often a manifestation of dominance where the person in privileged position is entitled to stare at his inferiors. Typically, women are objects of men's stare, and disabled bodies are objects of so-called able-bodied people's stares (the Victorian ideal of a gentleman, however, required self-governance and restraining oneself, including one's eyes). Part of these social power mechanisms can be stigma assignments where staring as a social act designates people whose bodies or behaviours cannot be readily absorbed into the visual status quo. However, the prototypical figure of normalcy, namely the white, urban, heterosexual, of good complexion, weight, height and what have you, is not what we actually see everywhere but rather is what we expect to see. Garland-Thomson calls these, more or less fictional human specimens, normates.

A crucial function of seeing is knowledge gathering. Staring is not just a desire to see more, it is also a desire to know more: where the eye leads, the mind follows. Staring can thus be seen as a form of scientific search for knowledge where we look at unfamiliar objects long and keen enough to resolve their mystery; to make them familiar and known. A classic example of this is the Foucauldian idea of a *clinical gaze*, which refers to clinical observation that aims to evaluate the true relationship between inside and outside, between visible and invisible. Clinical gaze is arguably a form of proper or acceptable staring where the viewer synthesizes visual apprehension into knowledge that benefits the knower in carrying out cultural requirements. But it is not necessarily all that far from baroque staring: flagrantly stimulus driven, gaping-mouthed, unapologetic staring which overrides reason and restraint. It is the kind of staring that seeks anything irregular, bizarre or exaggerated that arouses fervour. However, the baroque starrer remains in a state of wonderment in front of an inexplicable sight, whereas the scientific-medical starrer strives to lay bare its secrets.

Garland-Thompson introduces and analyzes different objects of staring in the light of many historical cases such as Robert Wadlow, the tallest man in recorded history (whose medical condition made him grow large, but staring made him into a Giant), or the seven short-statured Ovitiz siblings who the notorious Josef Mengele selected to his pseudoscientific experiments in Auschwitz and by doing so was responsible for their survival. Mengele was obsessed with staring at the Ovitizes but his stare was not simply a matter of a medical interest in looking at the particular shape and size of these people as a form of pathology. The Nazi doctors' way of looking at people with impairments represented a *eugenic stare*; a perverse form of recognizing human particularity in order to extirpate it. This inevitably raises uncomfortable questions about the nature of ultrasound scan: is it a matter of pure

clinical gaze that serves the autonomy of pregnant women or, in fact, a eugenic stare with the aim to be rid of future disabled people?

Staring as such is neither good nor bad. History is filled with examples of bad staring that takes satisfaction in someone else's misfortune, and which doesn't recognize the humanity and equal worth of the staree. Staring, however, need not be destructive; it can be good and productive when it reaches out, is mobilized into political action and affirms the personhood of other people. Garland-Thomson also refers to the notion of recognition as the cornerstone of ethics and politics. She uses the work of Nancy Fraser to highlight the importance of mutual recognition where people genuinely try to see each other as they really are. This philosophical territory could have possibly been explored in more detail, but on the other hand, it could have easily resulted in an unhelpful digression.

Staring: how we look is informative and analytical in a way which to me represents one of the greatest pleasures of academic scholarship: it offers new and surprising insights about mundane and spuriously trivial phenomena. By doing this, it opens new horizons. It is interesting to analyze one's own as well as other people's staring in the light of the various viewpoints given in this book. For instance, my crude analysis of the difference between Finns and Brits as for staring at disabled people is the following: Finns are like Victorian gentlemen who secretly have a look at things. To us, staring at disabled people and women's breasts is in the same league: a quick glance is acceptable as long as you don't get caught red-handed (if you do, you are humiliated by your own carelessness and stigmatized as a boor). Brits, on the other hand, are like cows; they stare with no shame whatsoever.

Garland-Thomson's book is beautifully written, in a very literary style, which has the downside that the non-native English speaker needs to resort to a dictionary quite often. But it's worth the effort because after reading this book, one, quite literally, looks at things differently.

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