

Apollo's Gaze

The *Charioteer of Delphi* is a life-size bronze statue erected in 474 BCE to commemorate a victory in the chariot races of the Pythian games. The statue's left arm is missing; the reins held in his right hand are no longer connected to his steeds; the headband has lost its silver inlay. Yet the glass eyes and copper eyelashes are remarkably well preserved. The charioteer's head and gaze are inclined to the side. This is one of the first direct interactions between a work of art and the viewer. He looks at you as much as you at him. The look is piercing.



The statue likely portrays the winning charioteer. However, it may also represent Apollo, the divine patron of the Pythian games. Apollo was the sun-god, having assumed this role from the Titan Helios of earlier mythology. Apollo was a god of many facets: the god whose chariot carried the sun across the sky, the god of music and the leader of the muses, the god of prophecy and poetry, the god of light and truth. Though generally beneficent, Apollo was sometimes dangerous. The horses of the sun's chariot occasionally ran wild and caused widespread destruction. This has been attributed to Phaethon, the son of Helios, though these may both be manifestations of Apollo.

The gaze of the *Charioteer of Delphi* has been interpreted in different ways. Does he look right through you? Or does he notice you even though his main concern is elsewhere, perhaps with his master's horses, perhaps with his own thoughts?

Why do we find the eyes so striking? The eyes of others are highly among the most important stimuli we process. They tell

us about the world, about ourselves, and about our colleagues. Human beings have evolved brain systems so that the eyes and the gaze of others can be efficiently processed.

The human eye differs from that of most other animals in that the sclera – the white of the eye – is clearly visible around the dark iris. Because of the clear contrast between sclera and iris, the direction of the gaze can be followed independently of where the head is looking. Other primates estimate what someone is looking at by the orientation of the head. Human beings assess the orientation of the eyes as well as the head. This ability is present in human infants of 12-18 months (Tomasello et al., 2007). Our brains therefore either inherit or rapidly develop neural systems that can specifically follow the gaze of other individuals. We track the gaze by where the dark of the eye is pointing. We are thus mistaken when tracking the gaze in photographs that have been contrast-reversed. This was elegantly demonstrated by [Pawan Sinha](#) (2000). In the following pair of stimuli, Humphrey Bogart appears to be looking in opposite directions:



This seems to be a cognitively impenetrable hard-wired system. Knowing that the photograph has been contrast-reversed does not prevent our mistaken impression of where the contrast-reversed Humphrey is looking.

The brain systems underlying the perception of eye and gaze involve the posterior superior temporal sulcus (Allison et al., 2000; Kingstone et al., 2004). This region of the association cortex receives input from more general visual areas, and has connections to regions of the parietal cortex related to attention and to more anterior temporal regions related to object perception and emotion.

Gaze perception provides us with two main pieces of information. The first occurs when another person is looking directly at you. This tells you of another consciousness and suggests the possibility of interaction. For many animals the gaze can be a challenge; for human beings it is often a prelude to communication. The second type of information occurs when another person is looking at something or someone else. This tells you the focus of their attention, and allows you to share their thinking.

Eye and gaze perception facilitates the development of social cognition (Emery, 2000; Itier & Batty, 2009). The newborn infant prefers to see faces with eyes open than with eyes closed. The open eyed face is a signal for social interaction. Over the first year of life the infant learns to follow the gaze of another person and in the second year the infant can begin to share attention with another. The ability to understand the perceptions and intentions of another person – “theory of mind” typically develops by the time the child is 4 or 5 years old.

The appreciation of the visual arts is essentially experiencing how someone else sees the world. We share the gaze of the artist, and try to relive what it was that moved them to record their insight. This can be either enlightening or disconcerting. Much visual art has been framed by male artists for the appreciation of male viewers (Korsmeyer, 2008). How then does a woman regard a painting of Venus? As the male onlooker or as the female object? Art should not be appreciated in a manner that distances itself from sensual

pleasure. Interpretation devoid of desire is empty. As Susan Sontag has said "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art" Art has multiple levels of meaning. The interaction between the viewer and the nude should include both sensuality and sympathy.

In some paintings the artist includes a person that looks directly at the viewer. The artist (or the model) may thus try to see what you are seeing in the painting. Or to suggest that the viewer is being looked at as much as looking. Sartre (1943) was deeply concerned with the concept of looking. When we look at the world we see objects. These are separate from us, perceived rather than perceiving, objects rather than subjects. When someone looks back at us, we sense the inversion of the process: we are the objects of another's gaze. This proves our existence as an object in the world, and also indicates the existence of other subjects. Furthermore, it adds a sense of being evaluated. Who am I that I should be looked at? The interplay between "other as object" and "other as subject" provides us with an understanding (and an evaluation) of both ourselves and our fellows.

The perception of another is crucial to social cognition. Postulating that other people have minds like ours (or that we have minds like theirs) is the basis for communication. Theory of mind does not necessarily require vision or hearing to develop, but it is clearly facilitated by being able to see and hear another person.

The sense of another is perhaps related to our sense of the divine. As Sartre said, God may be "the concept of the other pushed to the limit." We term this percept (or concept) of the Absolute Other the "numinous." We can experience the numinous when we are in the presence of something or someone that transcends our normal understanding. Meditation and prayer are interactions between the human with the numinous. In many cases, people have described these in terms of being looked at or examined. Hans Urs von Balthasar describes prayer as

submitting oneself to the gaze of God:

God's gaze is not passive (otherwise it would not be a divine gaze); he does not merely 'read off' or ascertain: his gaze is creative, generative, originative, by his utterly free decree. 'This is what, in my eyes, you are; this is what you mean; no other truth can have any validity but this, for me, for you, or for anyone else.'

This then may in part explain our fascination with the *Charioteer of Delphi*. We have become objects of a divine gaze. The human brain has a way of thinking that lets us see ourselves as we might be seen from a distant and objective viewpoint. Seen by an athlete at an ancient games, or by the god that was his patron. Examined *sub specie aeternitatis* – under the aspect of eternity.

Allison, T., Puce, A., & McCarthy, G. (2000). Social perception from visual cues: role of the STS region. *Trends in Cognitive Science*, 4, 267–278.

Emery, N.J. (2000). The eyes have it: the neuroethology, function and evolution of social gaze. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*, 24, 581–604.

Itier, R. J., & Batty, M. (2009). Neural bases of eye and gaze processing: The core of social cognition. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 33, 843–863

Kingstone, A., Tipper, C., Ristic, J., & Ngan, E., 2004. The eyes have it! An fMRI investigation *Brain and Cognition*, 55, 269–271.

Korsmeyer, C. (2008). [Feminist aesthetics](#). Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Sartre, J-P. (1943, translated by H. E. Barnes 1956, republished 1993) *Being and nothingness: an essay on*

phenomenological ontology. New York: Simon and Schuster. (section of the look is pp. 340-400; quotation is from p. 356).

Sinha, P. (2000). Here's looking at you kid. *Perception*, 29, 1005-1008

Sontag, S. (1964, reprinted 1986). *Against Interpretation*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux. (p. 14).

Tomasello, M., B. Hare, B., Lehmann, H., & Call, J. (2007). *Reliance on head versus eyes in the gaze following of great apes and human infants: the cooperative eye hypothesis*. *Journal of Human Evolution*, 52, 314-320.

Urs von Balthasar, H. (1955, translated by Graham Harrison, 1986) *Prayer*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press. (p. 40).