

Looking as Political Act: The Oppositional Gaze in Cinematic Realism

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Project Abstract

Within the ethnographies, memories, and archives produced throughout a capitalist empire, the ‘gaze’ has generally been used against the subject, creating narratives which entrench the hegemony in defining the subject to accord with the needs of the dominating culture. The term ‘oppositional gaze’ was developed in 1992 by bell hooks in conversation with Laura Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*: the ‘gaze’ is a scopophilic act albeit with the potential to be a radical method for resistance, the oppositional gaze then refers to ‘looking’ as a defiant act to which the actors reclaim a sense of autonomy over the spectator and turn the gaze back upon their oppressors. What makes the act of ‘looking’ so defiant and how this looking translates to an oppositional gaze is the question this project attempts to answer through a close reading of various media and using an array of methods and theories from such disciplines as film studies, ethnography, data ethics. I build upon the foundations of hooks and Mulvey while asserting that the definition of ‘looking’ goes beyond visual perception and into the act of understanding and perceiving. I apply these theories of the ‘gaze’ and my own explorations of ‘looking’ to juxtapose Rahul Jain’s *Machines* (2016) and Chloe Zhao’s *Nomadland* (2020) in analyzing its application and limitations. With this project, I hope to impel further discussion on the study of the gaze by compiling demonstrations of its application in various media and its disruption of prevailing narratives.

This multimedia project aims to identify the oppositional gaze through analytic means by applying the theories of hooks, Mulvey and others to art and media and to emphasize the ways in which art and cinema has been a method for decolonization and resistance. This project defines cinema as a site for the creation of hegemony, but also for destruction of prevailing narratives and assumptions. As a further matter, I will expand the application of an 'oppositional gaze' to survey how it is usable for other contexts beyond cinema—anthropology, literature, data science, etc. As I do not present that there is a conclusive classification for 'seeing' the world and in acknowledging the limitations and shortcomings of my own knowledge in this topic, I do not “define” the oppositional gaze so much as I try to identify it in my analysis of media and other disciplines. There is no one monolithic culture or perspective, but there is a way of seeing¹ the world from outside the way it is portrayed by institutions and superstructures.

Statement of Intent

“During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well.”

-Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935)

I remember growing up in the Philippines: being told how pretty, and thus valuable, I am for my pale skin, being told not to stay outside in the sun for too long lest my skin get tan, seeing billboards for glutathione on all the billboards in the public streets and empty spaces². All the people I saw on tv had light skin. I didn’t question it all much as I was growing up, and I believed these lies anyways. I came across the poetry of Langston Hughes as I was looking for

¹ In my terminology of “looking”, I mean to go beyond the visual sense and onto consumption of an object

² In a way, these advertisements too are the monuments of capitalism

materials for a class assignment one day, and read his poem “Passing”. In it, a man writes a letter to his mother thanking her for not acknowledging him as she passed him by while he was with colleagues. He was thanking her for not giving away his racial identity, for not recognizing him as her son. I had grown up under a semi socially conscious household at least in the context of the Philippines, and knew even then I was anti war, anti racism, but never really connected these principles to my own experiences and my own positionality. With this poem I recognized a similar struggle as I saw in my own country. In a way, my understanding of politics emerged from my awakening to this depersonalization [1] I grew up into; whereas in my country it is so ingrained in our reality that we just refer to it as “colonial mentality”, I see it now as the psychical blow that imperialism deals in us all.

We cannot achieve freedom as long as we live under the images and identities that colonizers made of the world. On a field trip to the provinces, my class saw an Indigenous family—in the city, we don’t interact with Filipino tribes who live beyond the industrialized cities very much, if at all. We only thought of them as myths from our textbooks, remaining impervious to colonialism, persisting through capitalism forever in the words we read in school. I can’t recall to this day which province we visited, nor would I be able to identify which tribe we saw, but I remember how my class responded. For some reason, my classmates thought they were funny, in the mean way that children make fun of things they don’t understand, and started lampooning comments about how they must stink, or how silly the men are for wearing what in the Western world would be called “skirts”, or for how curly their hair were. I laughed along, to fit in, but I still don’t get the joke, and I don’t think my classmates did either. I saw no difference between the people inside of that school bus and outside of it. Have we been conditioned to look at the world through this gaze that denigrates who we are? With what gaze are we looking at the

world and at ourselves? Who is narrating the stories we tell ourselves? I will not be answering these questions with this project, but I will attempt to explore the political nature of the gaze, of how we see the world and understand it through our looking at it, and how to defy with a look.

On the Analysis of Media

“Cinema is not only a technology, it is a social practice with conventions that profoundly shape its forms. My particular interest, of course, is that cinema has been a primary means through which race and gender are visualized as natural categories; cinema has been the site of intersection between anthropology, popular culture, and the constructions of nature and empire.”

-Fatimah Tobing Rony; *Race, Cinema, and the Ethnographic Spectacle* (1996)

My intention with this project is to inquire on the intersection of media and social psychology. In reckoning with historical legacies of exclusion, it is imperative to consider the narratives and monuments that have been forged throughout history and how the present is shaped by the past. The monuments we create are a reflection on ourselves; they expose what we choose to immortalize and what we tolerate. Whenever people ask me what I miss the most from the Philippines, my home country, I think of the architecture: the haunting, and dazzlingly beautiful statues and churches left behind by colonial Spain. These buildings signify an era that while no longer present in the technical sense, still looms over the politics of my country with great presence. Though they are ghosts of the past, these structures embody in the present our understanding of our identities and the virtues and principles we preserve. I grew up with these monuments to the past in the context of my country's history with colonialism, and I fondly remember my childhood years being fascinated by their extravagance, especially at times when I look outside my window and feel the cold and dullness of Seattle, the city I live in now, from its concrete, utilitarian structure and skyscrapers. However, these monuments also preside over my country's socio-political structures in a way that erases our own culture of belonging, kababayan,

and bayanihan. It is when we destroy these monuments that we reject our submission to the status quo that oppresses us, and weaponize our memories of who we are and who we try to be.

This project is a study of the oppositional gaze, and how to reclaim the form of narrative as a way of resisting mainstream archival/historian practices that for so long have been removed from their subjects. It matters to the subjects of the white gaze, archival gaze, hegemonic gaze, etc. to turn the gaze back on the archive and on the practices being used to try to perceive them. bell hooks began her definition of the oppositional gaze by recounting how slaves were punished for looking at their masters, and this project explores how those masters knew that by looking, i.e. perceiving, one indicates recognition, and when one uses the oppositional gaze it is a declaration that you are perceiving the subject of your gaze as an object in your reality, and the reality in which you are an oppressive slavemaster was one that the masters wished to deny, thus punishing the slave for simply looking. For the purposes of this project I will expand my research onto different forms of media and limit my reference of films to a few sources.

Art created with a consideration of identity and positionality lends to a greater understanding of the world. When different perspectives come together we gain something that is a challenge to our own tunnel vision by showing our world from different eyes. Struggle is universal, and it is the power of media and documents of our history that we experience what we would not otherwise be able to; from that we might gain a better understanding of the issues other people face so as to understand the struggles we ourselves must reckon with. Because the patrons of cinema seek a sense of reality in the image while also allowing an escape from

reality³, cinema is particularly relevant in appraising how reality is reconstructed in the cultural-ideological sphere and how that reconstruction then reverberates into the world.

Theories of the Gaze

Since the birth of moving pictures, cinema has been used to narrate reality in a way that fantasizes the world in which we exist. The certain way that the camera ‘looks’ at the world is one that exercises God-like power over its sight of the subject. In these chapters I engage with Laura Mulvey’s gaze theory along with bell hooks’ oppositional gaze to try and define these terms in a broader context.

There is Pleasure in Looking⁴: Gaze Theory

“Every image embodies a way of seeing. Even a photograph. For photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights. This is true even in the most casual family snapshot. The photographer’s way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject. The painter’s way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper. Yet, although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing.”

-John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (1972)

There is pleasure in looking—such is the mantra set forth by Laura Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* written in 1973, and the central currency for this pleasure is power. In cinema, the camera controls everything we see. But that camera too is only an extension of someone else’s vision: the director, the editor, the producers, all hold power over the images assembled to recreate some sort of narrative. This narrative is always a representation of reality [2], for even in representing fiction or mythology one must still present what is

³ Although this is not the subject of my research, the question of what makes cinema unique from that of literature is one that demands further exploration

⁴Mulvey L 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16, 3, Autumn 1975

recognizable to the human eye. [3] Elements of film such as lighting, angles, sound, and editing, all convene to elicit certain responses from the viewer. In the conventional Hollywood form, the certain response that is sought is for power—power over women, power over racial minorities, power over the lower class. Because the assumed spectator⁵ is male, it is the desires and compulsions of the male psyche that is satisfied in watching cinema. [1] Female spectators may then identify with the male surrogate for the next hour and a half, or they may choose to see themselves through the objectified female characters—achieving pleasure through this fantasy.⁶ Male or female, the viewer takes on a heterosexual male gaze by default in passive consumption.

The implications of the ‘look’ is the vital matter that must be analyzed in tracing the political and psychoanalytic applications of cinema. There is a voyeuristic instinct that is satisfied when we watch the cinema; the ability to see people in their most vulnerable moments, moments of anger, pain, sadness, joy. Mothers abandoning their children, the last words of a dying mogul, betrayals, affairs, secrets, and lies. However these are all still illusions, after all. But what these moments in time offer to the casual viewer is a sense of a different eye: life through another person’s positionality and experiences. It is from living vicariously through the lens that one finds pleasure, excitement, thrill in a society deprived of it. In classic Hollywood cinema⁷ the ‘look’ is used indulgently for pleasure; the format of the classical Hollywood film is that cinema gives comfort where it is needed, thrill where there is none, forgiveness when it is not given. Characters are surrogates for their real-world counterparts, and injustices are made reversible, people are redeemed, salvation is given.

⁵ And, at the height of classical Hollywood, many of the people behind the screen and the camera

⁶ Black female spectators are not privy to this pleasure, as posited by bell hooks in her essay and will then be the subject of the next chapter

⁷ The framework for Mulvey’s analysis

Film controls dimensions of time and space; every single grain on the screen is a deliberate choice made to elicit responses from the spectator. Images have a tremendous influence on how reality is seen and what memories are created [4], the decisions we make and our understanding of reality [5], and our sense of self. [6] Contingent on what is hidden to us and what we are allowed to see, is the perception to be taken from the film. In the relations provided to the spectator-owner in art, literature, film, and media, there is a privilege afforded to the spectator-owner by the forms and techniques of the lens and screen. Throughout, it is the presence of the spectator to which the subject(s) of the film exist and continue their stories. To be gazed at is to be reminded that you exist in other people's perceptions, that from a different way of seeing you are a simple object. In someone else's world you are forever incomplete, for there is no amount of looking that can create the same relationship you have to the self as there is to another. Thus, when spectators 'see' the people on screen, there lies a certain misidentification that is artificially created by the camera that will continue to exist in the spectator's ego.

There is Power in Looking⁸: The Oppositional Gaze

"In the case of the American Negro, from the moment you are born every stick and stone, every face, is white. Since you have not yet seen a mirror, you suppose you are, too. It comes as a great shock around the age of 5, 6, or 7 to discover that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you. It comes as a great shock to see Gary Cooper killing off the Indians, and although you are rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians are you.

It comes as a great shock to discover that the country which is your birthplace and to which your life and identity has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you. The disaffection and the gap between people, only on the basis of their skins, begins there and accelerates throughout your whole lifetime. "

-James Baldwin, (1965)⁹

⁸ hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. , 2015. Print.

⁹ Educational Video Group. (1965). Debate: *Baldwin vs Buckley*. Greenwood, IN: Educational Video Group.

In acknowledging the pleasure that is satiated from looking, we must also consider the power that is held by the spectator over the subject. The oppositional gaze is looking with the purpose of conveying, perceiving. It seeks to break through the barrier of identity to look under a gaze that is opposed to convention. In foregoing the differences between spectator and subject by rejecting the assumed white male gaze, the oppositional gaze is one denying pleasure from looking, resisting voyeurism, and submits itself to a self-determined subject. It shows reality as it is for a people that is “Other”-ed, outside of status quos which control the means of cultural production.

Coined by bell hooks, the oppositional gaze refers to the “right to look” and the power in looking. As James Baldwin wrote: *“You cannot lynch me and keep me in ghettos without becoming something monstrous yourself... You give me this advantage: that whereas you have never had to look at me, because you’ve sealed me away along with sin and hell and death and all the other things you didn’t want to look at, including love, my life was in your hands, and I had to look at you. I know more about you, therefore, than you know about me.”* [2] To gaze is a political act, and one rooted in rebellion and insubordination; it conveys that one recognizes and understands the other. The gaze in media has so long been in the hands of the status quo, but when artists outside of the hegemony create art it shows a world that is the reality for those of us who dare go beyond it. When the “male gaze” or the hegemonic gaze is challenged with the oppositional gaze we affirm our right to our identity, and to see and document the world we know and live in.

The breaking of our ties to the history created by oppressors and colonizers through the toppling of monuments and the archiving of our narratives is an act of self-determination and self-autonomy which for so long has been denied to colonized people. While the destruction of these monuments don't instinctively translate to policymaking or governing in ways that repair the institutions and structures existing and presently defining our relationship with race, gender, etc. their destruction is our rejection of the narratives written against the marginalized histories.

What is established from Mulvey's work is that the act of looking generates pleasure as the result of the power structures created to bridge spectator and subject. In response to Mulvey, bell hooks insinuates that black female spectators are unable to derive this same pleasure, being of a people that is doubly oppressed and consequently unrecognized in cinema only as objects to serve the plot of the main characters. [1] Thus, black female spectators develop an 'oppositional gaze': one that seeks not pleasure, but understanding and recognition. There is no identification with the surrogate-protagonist of the Gary Cooper mold, but a sense of looking at the image beyond the gaze of the surrogate-protagonist or the people behind the camera. In empathizing with an alternate surrogate, whether it is the "mammy" archetype or the "Indians" in old Westerns, or simply rejecting association with the lens or the surrogate-protagonist, film spectators can gather an understanding of reality from film that looks into our relationship with ourselves and with different systems of rule, groups of people, etc.

Looking is transformed from a scopophilic act to an act of defiance by using the process of looking to communicate. To look is to consume; the act of looking generates understanding from one to another. It is a power that has the potential to be used for transforming reality. In the

act of looking, the spectator forms a perception of the subject. Because looking with an oppositional gaze indicates recognition, that when one is looked at it communicates that there is an existence of the self outside of self-identification, there is a defiance to this act.

To use the 'look' is to initiate understanding and form perceptions of the subject that is looked at. Slaves were punished for looking with an oppositional gaze because it's one that refutes the existing assumptions and lies of the status quo and creates counter-narratives that disrupt collective memories and histories. When one is looked at, one assumes existence in someone else's world and imagination, but the narrative of who they are in that reality differs from how one would like to see themselves. The subject of the slaves' gaze, the slave masters, are perceived as such, which then contradicts the narratives of the slave master¹⁰ of their lack of culpability to history. The slave masters may recognize their role in the world, but do not wish to acknowledge it. Thus, they suppress the slaves' right to look.

Bell hooks centers her argument on the black female spectator to emphasize the standard of media to cater to the white male audience as a simple symptom of the orders within capitalist society, however the oppositional gaze is not reserved solely to black women; there are many social classes that are "Other"-ed and treated as inferior. To take on an oppositional gaze means to oppose the relying power structures that exist within the world in which cinema and art is produced. The oppositional gaze is looking with the purpose of conveying, perceiving. It seeks to break through the barrier of identity to look under a gaze that is opposed to convention.¹¹ In

¹⁰ These narratives, such as the Lost Cause narrative, still continue to be pushed today accompanied with the current (at the time of this writing) resistance to Critical Race theory curriculums

¹¹ I further argue that in seeing "the Indians [as] you" is a resistance to the hegemonic apparatus which seeks to divide groups of people by categories invented in Western society. While our histories may not all be the same, nobody is truly free until we are all free, and struggles against colonialism, imperialism, etc. are joint struggles.

foregoing the differences between spectator and subject by rejecting the assumed white male gaze, the oppositional gaze is one denying pleasure from looking, resisting voyeurism, and submits itself to a self-determined subject. It shows reality as it is for a people that is “Other”-ed, outside of status quos which control the means of cultural production.

Ethnographic Cinema

In analyzing how the gaze is used in cinema, *Nomadland* and *Machines* stand as two particular cases which attempt to use the gaze with similar methods and similar narratives however with different intentions, that which then affect the methodology through the gaze. Whereas the socio economic conditions in India and in America are not comparable, these films both address issues at the heart of global capitalism which is a situation universally known, and I aim to analyze these two films through their use of the gaze as a method for social commentary and resistance.

By applying theories of the gaze to these two films, I argue that the oppositional gaze transforms the act of looking from a scopophilic act to a defiant act of perception showing an opposite perspective to that of the conventional Hollywood film; it is a ‘look’ which seeks to provoke and refute assumptions. The oppositional gaze is one which provokes the spectator, returns autonomy to the subject (fictional or otherwise), and reveals what is unknown to the conventional spectator. I also stress that the oppositional gaze is a method that is applicable in many fields beyond cinema, from ethnography to data science. It is a practice of being invited to ‘look’ rather than stealing glances which can never express the complete story of the subject.

Nomadland, originally a book by journalist Jessica Bruder, is a revelation of Amazon-era America, depicting the lives of “nomads” who live on the outskirts of modern society. *Machines* follows the work in a textile factory in the Gujarat province of India, and the lives of the people working there. A common vocation for these films is the depiction of displaced workers by an outsider, as each respective director is filming communities they are not a part of, a form of ethnographic filmmaking. Taking into account my purpose of analyzing the gaze in these films, I choose to disregard the filmmakers’ identity and personal background only to say that they are outsiders to emphasize the gaze as a method that is deliberately applied and intended, rather than an inherent attribute not developed and cultivated.

Nomadland follows one (fictional) nomad named Fern who chooses the lifestyle after the death of her husband, taking an omniscient point of view that allows the spectator to hold power over the subject. As *Nomadland* follows Fern across the country, we meet a variety of other nomads all with different reasons for choosing the lifestyle, with little depth afforded to their stories. *Machines* gives the spectator access inside the spaces of the workers and a few business owners as well as moments outside of the factory, such as the scenes documenting the environment in which the factory is contained. *Machines* takes an observational cinema approach in following the workers; the camera slides through the floor to keep up with the workers’ feet as they carry heavy items, it follows as workers eat, sleep, and clean themselves, and conducts interviews with some of the workers. In *Machines*, the camera doesn’t see anything that is not privy to another factory worker.

Despite its attempts to give voice to the nomads of America, *Nomadland* goes very little beyond its story, for it doesn't point to the roots of the problems that displace and disenfranchise entire groups of people to live away from greater community. There are reasons for nomadism, and *Nomadland* stays silent on the ills of capitalism that push people to the outside. A nomad tells the story of how she came into the lifestyle, recalling a co-worker's death just before retirement, but there is no criticism or anger towards the corporate America they abandoned. The nomad speaks in a still, calm voice; even the camera is afraid to directly face her, which allows the spectator to avoid confrontation with the issues being shown yet remaining unprovoked. The film depicts nomadism as a choice that frees people from grief or personal tragedy, when in reality it is anything but freedom.

We see the main character, Fern, working in Amazon, and everyone is smiling. It is a pacified, editorialized, sanitized version of reality that is far from the real stories of the workers that is the crux of the book the film is based upon. The book depicts grueling, dehumanizing work that the writer Jessica Bruder states *"For one thing, Amazon should pay its workers more and give them better working conditions. It's laughable that the workers get a 15-minute break when they have to spend it walking to the break room. It's completely insane. Nomads need a voice, but at the same time, its extremely unlikely that they'll organize for better working conditions because they're vulnerable and always on the move."* [1] In the film there is little, if any, criticism of the working conditions the nomads are subjected to whereas the whole motive of writing the book was to shine light on these unfair working conditions and the predatory practices that companies like Amazon took upon the recession.

Nomadland attempts to embolden the choices and positionalities of the displaced and dispossessed by granting dignity through the pretence of choice: being a Nomad is a choice made by Fern to move on after the death of her husband, nomadism is a choice for the van-dwellers as a form of relenting to the system rather than fighting it. In its efforts to give voice to the community, *Nomadland* dulls their words to remain neutral. This is a method that seeks to comfort its viewers, and the country, rather than provoke or question.

On the other hand, *Machines* directly engages with the subjects and gives appropriate space for the factory workers to express their reasons for being there, many out of work due to farming shortages and having to sacrifice time, money, and family just to work in the factory. A young man talks about his future over the harsh noises of the factory: *“If I can learn this now, I can do any work later.”*, a union leader and an unnamed worker spill details about intimidation of unionizations: *“If the workers unite, they can get our bosses to yield. But the laborers are not united....But when the laborers do unite, the leader is usually killed.”*, two workers continue to discuss solidarity and the lack of it: *“What can two people do? Even if we skip two day’s work in protest. The company doesn’t close because of two people not coming to work.... And they just carry on”*. Especially poignant is one man who early in the film discusses the loans he takes just to travel to the factory, whose only money he spends on chewing tobacco for there is no other habit to afford and a need for a “buzz” to work.

Additionally, we get an insight onto the factory owners and their justifications of their practices; as we hear a factory owner talk about the “illiterate people” who will spend their money on “rotten things” like chewing tobacco when we have just learned beforehand that

chewing tobacco is the only relief to “sit and breathe” for the worker. In framing the words and actions of the owner in a way that comes after the context, we are led to react from an oppositional view that is in a way, taking the Kuleshov effect of editing to direct how the audience interacts with the bosses. [2] The owner's home expenditure has just “doubled in 12 years” and he recites some more numbers: “50% [of the workers] don't care about their families” but as we gaze at this man with all the context we have gained from facing the workers and following them in the factory, we recognize these words as lies.

“*My only satisfaction is that everyone dies. Nobody takes anything with them. Even when the rich go they leave the world with nothing.*” are the final words we hear in *Machines* from the man who disclosed his loans and spending on chewing tobacco and the last words we hear in the film. What is created with this narrative choice is a power structure wherein the worker, i.e the subjects of the film, gains control over their own story and how to end it. As the workers get the final word, we return again to the scene of labor: the work continues just as the workers predicted. The final scene mimics the beginning; there is no end to this cycle of work and death for the protagonists of *Machines*. *Nomadland* chooses to retain a more hopeful tone; when probed on her living status, Fern responds by saying she is “houseless, not homeless”, though this too fails to point to the root of the socioeconomic situations looming over the life of nomads, and the exploitation that is frequently allowed at the expense of the community.

A significant difference between the two films is that whereas *Nomadland* paints its landscape through nudity, the environment of *Machines* is simply naked and aware of its nakedness to the spectator. The workers acknowledge the camera and directly face it; the nomads

speak to each other as we eavesdrop on their stories. In *Machines* you are frequently made aware of your role as an outsider-spectator looking in to the private work of these workers, through their direct looks to the camera and consequently direct looks to the spectator, and through the decisive editing of scenes which follow the work and then into the inner lives of individual workers. The audience sees the workers sleep, clean their bodies, and sing—but these are not performances for the camera, instead these are essential biological functions important to replenish the body for more work and continue human functioning. Essentially, the audience does not see anything that is unseen by other workers. There is no privilege of the spectator as an invited audience.

In *Nomadland*, the spectator is an intruder, satisfying voyeuristic pleasures. The nomads, in fact nobody in the screen, is aware of the camera, and it is made known to the spectator. Taking on a predatory gaze, the spectator sees the nomads going to the bathroom, in the hospital, in their most private moments, which further imposes a vulnerability upon the subjects that pleases the audience to be privy to. As the spectator becomes privileged into an omniscient view that is above all the characters in the film, they are pulled into this world without any context or understanding of the people that are there prior to their appearance. This way of looking is pure cannibalism [3] that feeds into scopophilic desires while draining the subjects of their self autonomy.

All throughout *Machines* are interactions which alert the spectator to the nature of their presence. Direct looks to the camera, a breaking of conventional film rules, transgress to a direct look at the spectator by the subject. In one particularly astounding moment of confrontation, the

workers of *Machines* speak directly to the camera and question the director's motives, effectively questioning the spectator as well through recognition within the camera. With this, the factory workers turn their gaze upon the screen, and consequently alter the relationship between the people behind the camera and those in front of it, i.e the subject reclaims their autonomy as directors of their own story. *Machines* approaches its content with intent to understand, by taking from the gaze of the subjects and listening to their sense of perception, all the while looking back at the spectator.

It is the presence of Fern that is the catalyst for all of *Nomadland*. In following traditional film form, employing a surrogate-protagonist in the form of Fern, framing the interactions as intimate and unbothered by the camera, there is a certain relationship between the spectator and subject that is made to privilege the spectator to, in a sense, glimpse into the life of nomadism as a form of virtual tourism that doesn't place an understanding of the subject nor a recognition to the spectator of utmost importance. In attempting to embolden the choices and positionalities of the displaced and dispossessed by pontificating nomadism as a personal choice to the fictional character and creating artificial dignity, the grand scheme of which nomadism is a symptom of greater conditions is sanitized and unprovoked.

Landscapes form a bulk of *Machines* and *Nomadland*, but while the landscape is occupied by a single person in *Nomadland*, it is the collective of workers which fill the space of the fog-covered province of Gujarat as they throw the fabrics created in the factory to the skies, fully acknowledging an alienation of labor. The diegetic sound of industrial noise and alarm bells haunt throughout *Machines*, filling sound and vision with the workers' reality. *Nomadland* takes

an individual resisting a broken system, in the spirit of conventional form [4], but in aversion to ideologically subversive cinema narratives, the individual merely resigns to the ills of the system, and frames the symptoms of capitalism as its solutions.

In obscuring the outsider role of the spectator and the surrogate for the audience in the form of Fern through the stylistic choices of the content-maker through suture [5], *Nomadland* perpetuates the lack of understanding befitting the identities of the nomads by the artifice of its individualized story. In framing Fern's journey in such a way that exaggerates her personal development over the shared communal experiences and values of the community, her nomadism, and consequently, the passive spectator's understanding of nomadism, is left short-sighted. A generous reading of the film is to regard the focus on one person's journey to fully understand the character in depth, and the efforts of the film to dignify the community.

Machines aligns its lens with the workers, and more directly emphasizes the power of solidarity both in form and content, by framing scenes of confrontation with the camera as the workers gather, and interviewing individuals on the situation of unions and solidarity in the workplace. While a direct reading of *Machines* gives little solution to the workers, there is dignity in how the workers speak for themselves and explain their lives, with a show of awareness and consent, directly to the camera. In situating the camera in ways that look into a person's psyche, or zoom out to emphasize a community, film has the ability to create perception that is oppositional or simply allies itself with prevailing systems of dominance. *Machines* and *Nomadland* simply aim towards similar purposes, and while I do not claim authority to say which film are oppositional and which are not, I see an oppositional gaze in *Machines* that is

lacking in *Nomadland*, thereby giving very little teeth to its critiques of society while *Machines* situates its spectators to 'see' its critiques directly from the subjects.

Other films

Films which refute a hegemonic gaze, through narrative as in the case of Kidlat Tahimik's *Perfumed Nightmare* or Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Bouki* through aesthetic rebellion, employ an oppositional gaze that goes from acknowledging colonialism and the imposed ways of seeing that infects the colonized world for further domination, into a rejection of the colonized way of seeing and into a revelation that propels its protagonist and the spectator into a realization against the hegemonies. In the Dardenne brothers' *Two Days, One Night*, which in similar fashion as *Nomadland* de-glamorizes its main actress to impose her onto the role of a working class woman, we follow the journey of the protagonist as she negotiates with her fellow workers to choose giving her back her job over a bonus, and as we glimpse into the lives of the other workers as the character knocks on their doors, we see reasons for why they would choose the bonus over solidarity with a fellow worker, and gain insight into the film's critique with every moment essential to gain an understanding of this contradiction of capitalism.

Through form, narrative, and intention, the oppositional gaze passes from maker of images to spectator. Films can employ an oppositional gaze through its own way of 'looking' and rejection of conventions. Though I feature in my core analysis two examples of ethnographic cinema, and what may be loosely classified as documentary, I claim that the oppositional gaze is a way of seeing that is available to fiction, literature, storytelling of all forms. In giving these few

examples, I hope to clarify the oppositional gaze as an indefinite way of seeing that is applicable through many elements of cinema.

General Practice

The oppositional gaze is not reserved solely for cinema; there are many disciplines which participate in cultural production and commissioned by capital for reinforcing hegemony. An oppositional gaze is a method for challenging and reinventing the archives and monuments, a practice within reach for all disciplines. As I wrote in my personal statement, Langston Hughes' poetry confirms a gaze that historically has been denied in the narratives of the status quo. With his poem "Let America Be America Again", it emboldens the presence of a people left outside the prevailing narratives to reveal their gaze of the country. Though it is not the focus of this paper¹², I identify an oppositional gaze in Frantz Fanon's practice of psychology, the ProPublica analysis of COMPAS¹³, Ken Gonzales-Day's series *Erased Lynchings*, due to their rejection of the way of seeing that enforces hegemony. Within these disciplines, the work of these artists and writers have looked outside of existing social structures to expand to different perspectives and identities.

¹² Although I involve many more kinds of media and fields of study in my main project

¹³ To attempt "neutrality", i.e, to deny the existence of a gaze, is to reinforce the inequities perpetuated in the status quo, which the COMPAS algorithm reinforces through its feeding of data collected from a prejudiced, inequitable society to an algorithm without sense of history or context.

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