

Decolonizing
the gaze:
bell hooks,
Cleo and the
act of looking
and being
looked upon

Deise Nunes

Decolonizing the gaze: bell hooks, Cleo and the act of looking and being looked upon is a commissioned text by Deise Nunes. Nunes has previously written about decolonization for Black Box teater, and has also moderated talks on this topic.

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I remember the first time I thought I could be a performing artist. I was probably 13 years old. Watching the movie, Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown, on TV with my family, the men, upon the appearance of the Spanish performer Rossy de Palma, exclaimed: "She is so ugly!" I was fascinated by Rossy de Palma: her dark hair, straight, shiny, with a charming fringe. Her big eyes between green and brown, her presence eating poisoned gazpacho. Her red outfit. In my teenage innocence, I thought: 'The boys at school call me ugly. Well, if an ugly girl can be on that film, wearing that red outfit, maybe I can grow up to be an actress like Rossy de Palma!'

In the 1980s in Brazil, black women played roles mainly as slaves and maids in soap operas. At that point in my life, I had never been to the theatre.

Colonial and patriarchal mentality, through pictorial narratives of white supremacy and the normalized male gaze, can explain my 13-year old self identify with a white European woman who was labeled 'ugly' in the eyes of men. Still, I am grateful to Rossy de Palma for having been there, exactly then.

Years later I would realize that seeking liberation while belonging to the African diaspora would entail a life-long process to decolonize my mind and my life, and also as an arts practitioner.

Although deeply personal, such a process is inherently a shared one.

The urge to establish a conversation about decolonization in the arts has reached Norway relatively late. The issue of decolonization is in itself not new in other parts of Western Europe and has been exhaustively debated, for instance, by French and British academia.

Even though we know that both black men and women have been dehumanized as colonized subjects, there is a special position for women of color in the colonial discourse: The black female body is designated as a carrier of the seeds of colonial subjugation, caretaker and servant of its children. At the same time, the experiences of black female and non-binary people have been either ignored or silenced. Therefore, the intersection of gender-race deserves a specific approach from a decolonizing perspective, in order to elaborate patriarchy as a paradigm for the construction of all aspects of Western domination and expansion.

The present essay is about collective decolonizing experiences through the spectatorship of audio-visual arts, from a black feminist perspective. In the following, I intend to examine part of the theories of oppositional gaze by the American feminist, bell hooks.

Through this paradigm of the black condition, I intend to shed light on the liberating potential performing arts can have for its spectators.

bell hooks: looking as agency

bell hooks (without capitalization) is the pen name of the American feminist, Gloria Jean Watkins. For more than four decades, hooks has been a fierce cultural critic and one of the most relevant black feminist thinkers of our time. Her question: "...but what about the black female body?" has permeated discussions on empowerment connected to popular cultural phenomena such as Beyoncé's album, *Lemonade* (2016), and the black female presence in the American audio-visual industry. In her writings and speeches, hooks discusses who is allowed agency in arts and culture.

Using a language that supports her assertion that feminism is for everyone, bell hooks discusses themes that reach beyond theory, reverberating in the lives of black women.

In her essay *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators*, bell hooks conceptualizes gaze as power, dialoguing with the thoughts of Michel Foucault and coining the idea of *oppositional gaze*. The concept is built upon 'looking-as-agency,' a political act happening within, and in resistance to, unbalanced power structures reflected in movie-making and movie-going.

Early in her life, hooks understood that looking could be dangerous. As a girl, she was often punished or reprimanded for staring at people, things or situations. Later in her life, as a student, she learned how enslaved black people were severely punished for looking. The discovery of this fact

made hooks aware of the traumatic roots associated with the feelings of curiosity that fed her gaze. Through her study of the works of Michel Foucault, hooks realized that the structure of oppression imposed on black people, was again reproduced by those same individuals when exercising parenthood. Such a mechanism is enabled by means of recurrent and perpetuated control strategies. In this context of uneven power relations, looking is constructed as a privilege, a potential act of empowerment and resistance.

Theatre, from the old Greek term *theatron*, from *theasthai*, means “to behold”, “to view”, and from *thea*, “act of seeing”. Knowing that, in ancient Greece, neither women nor enslaved subjects were allowed to go to established theatre festivals, we can ask: Which gazes are we talking about when referring to spectatorship? Who is allowed to look at what?

Often, artists talk about “engaging the audience (s)” as a goal for their works. But who is this mythical entity, “the audience”?

My avant-garde, European theatre education through Odin Teatret in Denmark always takes me back to Eugenio Barba’s theatre anthropology, even if at some point I have also to recognize that libertarian theatre theory may fall short when it comes to the intersections of race-gender. However, theatre anthropology doesn’t use the term ‘audience,’ it deals rather with ‘spectators.’ The performative event, be it theatre, performance,

ritual, film or a football match, is attended by individuals, each with their own account of the received experience.

Taking this idea into bell hooks’ realm, women of color are interesting spectators. Firstly, because their bodies are rarely present as doers in the performance – when they do, their representation often rests upon a specific stereotypical image. Secondly, because their experiences as viewers are rarely described or discussed.

Observing awakens the thought, the potentiality of (self-)reflection, study, analysis, scrutiny and criticism. It creates awareness. Looking has, in the simple act of focusing, the seed to sharing ideas and practices that eventually point to the liberation of oppressed individuals. Looking then, becomes a defiant challenge to an establishment that was created to exclude ‘other’ gazes. But isn’t it what we see, in combination with what we have seen, that forms the gaze?

hook’s studies on cinema and black moviegoers from an American filmatic-historical perspective offer us important parallels with other art forms. In this context, the novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), by the American writer Toni Morrison is an important reference. In the book, set in the 1940’s, a poor, working woman of color, Miss Pauline, offers an account of her experience in the movies. Miss Pauline speaks about the pleasure she feels when watching romantic stories. Having no black characters to identify with, Miss Pauline

unconsciously projects herself as the white female character.

hooks reference to Miss Pauline makes me think of my 13-year old me, and other black girls, to whom the experience of spectatorship still does not reflect, or even acknowledge, our own existence.

Timely, hooks points to other black women's experiences of spectatorship, for instance, accounts of those who consciously avoid identification, or 'looking too deep.' She points to her own deep disappointment when faced with the young mixed-race character in the 1959 movie *Imitation of Life*. Watching the character's struggle to 'pass as white,' hooks feels such a deep sorrow, that she stops going to the movies.

When, some time later, she goes back to this form of entertainment, it is with a new gaze: the oppositional gaze. A gaze that has a distance and is capable of naming and elaborating its experiences, identifying neither with the victim nor with the perpetrator, hooks points out. Such a gaze appears in opposition to the two ways in which movie-making can be violent towards black women: through the denial of black female subjectivities as interesting cinematic narratives, and/or the positioning of black female bodies in situations of slavery, servitude, subjugation and/or dehumanizing over-sexualization.

Cleo's gaze

This oppositional gaze was important for me in my process of reflection during a recent, remarkable experience of spectatorship: Alfonso Cuaron's acclaimed movie, *Roma* (2018). The movie invites the spectator, through stunning black and white photography, to look into the life of Cleo, a house-keeper of indigenous origin in a political uneasy Mexico City in 1971. Cleo devotes her long days to the family who employ her: a couple, their four children and the maternal grandmother.

In the beginning of the action, the father of the family goes on a trip, and later on we realize that he has left the family to be with another woman, leaving his wife alone with her mother, the children, the dogs, two maids, a driver and a car that is too big for the house's garage. The storyline seems almost surgically focused on Cleo's daily tasks and the dynamics of a middle-class Mexican family – probably inspired by the director's own biography. Nonetheless, in its painful beauty, *Roma* quietly exposes the social inequalities amongst the women and the excruciating mixture of love, belonging and laboral exploitation that women of color have experienced in post-slavery times.

Roma is one of the very few movies I have seen featuring a female indigenous protagonist, played by Yalitza Aparicio. I am myself of black indigenous Latino heritage, a daughter and niece of women who were sent away from their home, before puberty, to work and live in family homes as

maids – as the antecedents of Cleo's story would probably tell. Watching *Roma* was a momentous, painful experience that, according to bell hooks, I would never be able to process through mainstream feminist film theory, due to its neglect of race and color in the arts.

The softness of the pictorial imagery of *Roma* is brutal, and this brutality is terrifyingly available to the deconstructed, decolonized, oppositional gaze. What we see, in the entire two hours of the movie, is Cleo's gaze thrown back at the spectator in the form of her bitter-sweet drops of daily life. It made me remember the account one of the wealthiest and most powerful women in the world, Oprah Winfrey, gave of her relationship to her grandmother, who used to tell her: "Oprah Gail, when you grow up, you have to make sure you find yourself some good white folks." In *Roma*, Cleo has found hers.