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ROTC and the Future of Liberal Education

By DONALD A. DOWNS

Staring, Observed • Bad Guys 2.0 • Literary Tourism



BILLY HOWARD FOR THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

People with disabilities can take control of the experience of being stared at, writes Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (above).

IN WESTERN CULTURES almost every mother at some point forbids it. Still, virtually all sons and daughters indulge in it, even as adults. They stare.

Their eyes may be riveted to someone beautiful, or drawn to someone with a disfigurement by that combination of fascination and repulsion that has long brought crowds to fairground “freak shows.”

Even as people with unusual physical features are increasingly out and about, few adults or children who see them can resist staring.

While staring can certainly be rude and demeaning, it also has constructive possibilities, says Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in her new book, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford University Press).

People with disabilities, argues Garland-Thomson, a professor of women’s studies at Emory University, are not merely the objects of other people’s gazes, but also take some control of the experience of being stared at. To the extent that they do that, they change the experience for the starrer, who may come away from it with greater understanding.

Staring extends Garland-Thomson’s pioneering work in disability studies, which has developed mainly over the last 20 years and which has an unabashedly activist component. She has written about the history of freak shows, and in 1996 she edited a collection of essays, *Freakery: Cultur-*

al Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body (New York University Press). The next year, in *Extraordinary Bodies* (Columbia University Press), she examined ways the disabled body had been deployed in literature as a marker of what was “normal.”

In *Staring*, as in her previous work, her own experiences inform her scholarship. “I have been stared at all my life,” she says, “because I have a unique and obvious physical disability”—she was born with a deformed arm.

Writing her earlier books, Garland-Thomson was struck that no term existed to name people who are stared at—an indication of how little scholarly attention has been devoted to their experiences. Her neologism is “staree.”

“That’s a clumsy word,” she admits. But she finds it useful “because it is both awkward and defamiliarizing”—and provides the person who is stared at a sense of agency, of being a subject rather than an object.

Staring is “a physical impulse,” she points out, citing research that shows that people who stare exhibit raised levels of the neurotransmitter

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The Gaze, Reconsidered

By PETER MONAGHAN

Peter Monaghan is a correspondent for The Chronicle.

KEVIN MICHAEL CONNOLLY



Kevin Michael Connolly (below) uses photography to document the stares he gets in his travels around the world (right, starers in Reykjavik, Iceland).



CHRISTOPHER ALSON

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dopamine, increased electrical activity in the brain, and faster heart rates. From a psychological standpoint, staring is a sign that viewers are struggling to make sense of what they see. It also provokes in starers “an unsettling awareness of our own embodiment,” Garland-Thomson says.

Such observations inform her greater interest: staring’s cultural and social dynamics.

The act is an uneasy one, she says, charged with the tension between wanting to stare and having been told that “staring is rude and unacceptable and makes the starrer seem to be an unmannered and uncouth person.” An anxious parent trying to dissuade a child from gawking is what she calls “the primal scene of staring.”

Garland-Thomson does distinguish among varieties of staring, describing benign “attentive staring,” such as looking to see if someone needs assistance, and malign “staring of domination,” such as sneering at a person who is handicapped. Most complex, she says, is “baroque staring, the stop-dead-in-your-tracks gawking we do when we see something so novel that we can’t not stare—when, indeed, it is novelty that we desire.”

The last of these is well captured in a riveting image by the photographer Weegee from 1941. His “Their First Murder”—one of many cultural artifacts Garland-Thomson discusses—shows varied expressions on the faces of on-lookers who have gathered on a Brooklyn street to rubberneck at the corpse of a man just shot dead: excited children, a tutting woman, the despairing wife, and the angry son of the victim. In it, as in many of Weegee’s images of gritty New York City life, “the focus ... is not the gripping scene of death itself but rather the act of staring at it,” she writes.

DISABILITIES, OF COURSE, also elicit baroque staring. But “starees” are not mere victims of that attention, she says.

For that reason, she argues, predominant theories of “the gaze” are incomplete. Michel Foucault, who beginning in the 1960s argued that the medicalized “clinical gaze” imposed a form of control on people with disabilities, inspired feminist and film theory that has explored the way that women’s bodies have been consumed by men as visual objects. True enough, Garland-Thomson says, but such work almost exclusively analyzes the perspective of the starrer. “I wanted to come up with a more complicated way of looking at visual relations,” she says.

She found a way forward through social interactionism, a prominent approach in the social sciences that examines how meaning emerges through social relations. She believes that orientation is particularly well suited to thinking about disabilities because people with disabilities are constantly called on to explain their physical conditions, if not apologize for them.

In grocery stores, for example, children are liable to ask Garland-Thomson bluntly, “What happened to your arm?”

In *Staring*, she discusses Susan Sontag’s argument in *Regarding the Pain of Others*

(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003) that staring becomes “ethical” when viewers of images of suffering people are moved to compassion for those people.

Garland-Thomson allows that stares can have an ethical dimension, because they can move people to beneficial action. But she draws short of insisting that starers have some sort of ethical responsibility, saying that because staring is so impulsive, “all we can do as starers is to monitor our staring behavior.”

She also faults Sontag for paying too little heed to the fact that the “staree” has just as telling a role as the starrer. The starrer “may extend or end or divert or rescue the stare,” she says. “Often starees are interested in relieving the anxiety of the interaction.”

When a child asks about her arm, for example: “A parent shows up and is mortified. Their darling is tormenting some supposedly poor person.” Depending on the circumstances, she chooses whether to explain her condition—patiently, in the spirit of education—or to simply end the encounter and hurry on to a checkout.

Such strategies have been forged in the context of larger social developments, including a weakening of the view that disabilities are primarily medical matters.

A powerful signal of that shift, she says, is the United Nations’ passage of the Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities, which went into force in May 2008. Emphasizing the rights of the approximately 650 million people in the world with disabilities—one in 10 people—it explicitly states that too often it is societies that disable people with disabilities.

For those living with disabilities, that statement reflects a “new way of understanding ourselves, as a community, and a minority group,” says Garland-Thomson. “And that emphasis on civil or human rights gives us a new confidence, and positive disability identity, and pride, if you will, that wasn’t available before the civil-rights era.”

The striking outcomes of that shift can be seen in the everyday lives of many people with disabilities, she says. Increasingly, for example, they have turned to “disability autobiography” to confront the demand that they explain themselves.

In her book, she describes in detail several cases of people who have made concerted, self-conscious public use of their disabilities. Among her examples are women with mastectomies who chose not to hide them with prosthetics or clothing; a man born without legs who travels the world taking photographs of people staring at him; and a comedian whose routine focuses on his disfigured face.

Those strategies are not without precursors. Even Chang and Eng Bunker, the original “Siamese Twins” of the 19th century, found ways to overcome exploitation. As soon as their contract expired with the merchant who brought them to the United States and displayed them for his own profit, they went into show business for themselves. In fact, they made enough money to retire from circus life and settle down as slave-owning farmers.

Garland-Thomson says it is surely no coincidence—though it is beyond the scope of her book—that just as some Americans with disabilities are finding ways to take greater control of how they are viewed, a growing number of Americans without visible disabilities are joining a “counterculture of extravagant appearance” marked by tattoos, piercings, and provocative dress that demand stares.

People with disabilities who draw attention to

their differences, making a kind of virtue out of necessity, are actually managing stares more effectively than the starers, she says.

Because staring is such a culturally fraught activity, some readers of Garland-Thomson's book will no doubt react defensively. They may dispute, for example, that staring is as commonly unfeeling, callous, or exploitative as she sometimes seems to assume. Some may object that, in characterizing staring as "profligate interest, stunned wonder, obsessive ocularity," she too broadly tars its practitioners.

Still, Garland-Thomson's case for a fuller way of seeing staring has won glowing compliments. One fan is Sander L. Gilman, a distinguished professor of the liberal arts and sciences and professor of psychology at Emory University whose books include cultural and literary histories of fat, aesthetic surgery, and the visual stereotyping of the mentally ill. He praises *Staring* for combining cultural and psychological insight into both the history of looking, which has been a key issue in aesthetics since Edmund Burke explored it in the mid-18th century, and the nature of stereotyping and prejudice, which social psychologists have mulled since the 1940s.

Garland-Thomson's "firm command of the theoretical literature, her interest in gender as a category, and her extraordinary reach of examples makes this book important to disability studies," writes Gilman in an e-mail message, "but it is also a link to a number of fields in the social sciences and the humanities."

Similarly positive is Susan M. Schweik, author of *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (published this month by New York University Press), which describes 19th- and 20th-century restrictions on the "unsightly" in public spaces. Schweik, a professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley, where she also co-directs the disability-studies program, praises Garland-Thomson's book as "memorable" and "illuminating." She notes, in particular, how well Garland-Thomson grounds her analysis in lived experiences of disability, a perspective that eluded the sociologist Erving Goffman in his classic *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity* (Prentice-Hall, 1963).

Gilman and Schweik both also remark that, despite *Staring's* considerable scholarly sophistication, Garland-Thomson's prose is accessible to nonspecialist readers.

She would presumably appreciate that comment. She wrote her book, she says, for "all the many people interested in their own staring behavior." ■

Onlookers gather in Brooklyn to gawk at the corpse of a man who was just shot, in a famous 1941 photograph by Weegee titled "Their First Murder."



PHOTOGRAPH BY WEEGEE (ARTHUR FELLIG), INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF PHOTOGRAPHY, GETTY IMAGES

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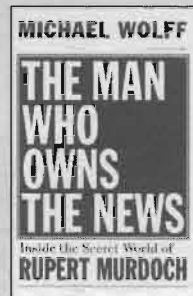
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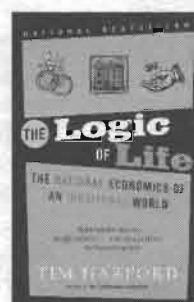
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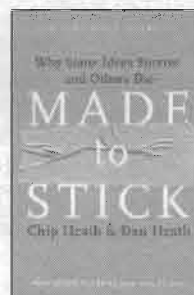
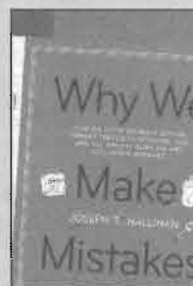
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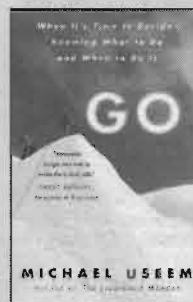
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