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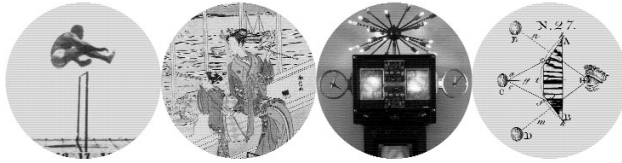
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# journal of visual culture



## Ways of Staring

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson

### Abstract

This article considers how staring informs the ways we know each other and the world around us. Staring, a complex, nuanced, and meaning-laden social interaction, can take many forms: arrested, separated, or engaged. It is an intense encounter which is sometimes a random, idiosyncratic confrontation and at other times a highly structured social ritual driven by the collective impulse to look. This article argues that staring often defines the relationship between disabled and nondisabled individuals. More important, however, it seeks to redefine this relationship by imagining, perhaps counter-intuitively, the object of the stare as determining the structure and outcome of the staring engagement. The staree may take charge of the encounter, in other words, using various strategies to both mediate and transform discomfiting interaction into an unexpected opportunity for mutual transformation.

### Keywords

arrested staring • civil inattention • disability • engaged staring • face work • separated staring • staring encounter

. . . staring, in its pure and simple essence, is the time required  
by the brain to make sense of the unexpected.

(Jeanne McDermott, mother of Nathaniel, who was born with  
Apert's Syndrome; see Burson and McDermott, 1993)

Staring is a snagging of the eye by the novel. We are drawn by the unanticipated and the inexplicable in an effort to make sense of experience. We comfortably rely on the predictable, at the same time that we anxiously

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crave the unpredictable. Staring registers attraction at the same time that it witnesses confusion. It is a universal part of our cognitive architecture that natural selection has bequeathed us. Intense, sustained looking and the ability to interpret such stares are fundamental to our survival as social beings. We are often at the mercy of such intense attraction. The exceptional face – whether foreign, hideous, contorted, or stunning – both disquiets and compels us. The unexpected alien is always both an affirmation of our humanity and a challenge to our complacent understandings. Encounters with the novel that demand our stares are fraught with contradiction and anxiety, embarrassment and pleasure. Staring is curiosity when we laud it and voyeurism when we condemn it. Staring is profligate interest. It is stunned wonder leaning perilously toward obsession. Such intense looking is – like sex and eating – a highly regulated social ritual.

As such, staring is the materialization in human bodies of a search for narratives that impose coherence on what appears to be randomness in our experience of the world. We stare at that which perplexes us in an intense effort to make sense of what is at once unfamiliar yet recognizable. It is a cognitive instinct desperately recruited to understand the unforeseen or incomprehensible experience (Wilson and Keil, 2001). Staring witnesses an interruption of our comforting narratives – variously called truth, knowledge, certainty, or meaning. What embodies the contingent, the unpredictable, the strange, the disordered prompts our stares as we seek to find order in apparent disarray. We may gaze at what we desire, but we stare at what astonishes us. Because staring both registers and demands a response, it enacts a drama about the people involved. This vivid form of human communication reveals who we imagine ourselves and others to be.

Language catalogues staring's intensity and its threat to both starrer and staree. Both 'stolen glances' and 'fixed stares' are egregious behaviors. To 'fasten one's eyes' on an object suggests a vulnerability of enthrallment. We speak of the 'penetrating looks', 'staring daggers', 'piercing eyes', 'riveting glances', and 'looking somebody up and down'. Such phrases reflect the discomfort of being the uneasy target of stares. Part of our enormous communal vocabulary of the eyes, staring is a particularly emphatic way of expressing our response to others. A more forceful and sustained form of looking than glancing, glimpsing, scanning, contemplating, surveying, gazing, and other forms of casual or normative looking, staring starkly registers intense interest and endows it with meaning.<sup>1</sup> That interest ranges widely in form – from domination, adoration, curiosity, surprise, allegiance, disgust, wonder, befuddlement, openness, hostility, to reverence. The stare is a highly charged interpersonal encounter that we snap up in a variety of contexts to put a sharp point on what we mean, think, or want.

Staring is a way of strongly reacting to another, the exclamatory syntax of human interpersonal relations embedded deeply in the neural automata of the brain; it is a residue of all that has gone before us. Not only does staring bespeak involvement, but being stared at demands a response as well. Thus, staring is always saturated with meaning. When it is intentional – as in the

long loving look or the hostile glare – we are the masters of our eyes. When the unexpected grabs our attention, however, staring is spontaneous and volatile. We cannot, even when we try, ignore compelling visual stimuli; we can only withdraw the stare willfully once it is in play. Face-to-face staring is perhaps the most intense form of looking because of its interpersonal quality and the most productive because of its immediacy. A sense of human obligation inheres in the visual exchange between persons. The lived staring encounter between individuals is thus more dynamic and unstable than staring at an inanimate object such as a painting, film, photograph, or curious item. Unpredictable things happen when people stare at other people.

The drama staring plays out enlivens everyone involved. The eyes are defenseless before a commanding spectacle. Such lavish attention disconcerts. Intent and sustained looking witnesses an intrusive involvement on the part of the starrer and thrusts uneasy attention on the staree. Another's stare excites the brain's electrical activity that is deeply embedded in the brain stem (Baron-Cohen, 1995: 98). This vivid looking creates a relationship – often momentary – between two people that is at once alienating and intimate. Staring breaches the conventionalized anonymity governing visual relations among strangers in modernity. Interactive and fluid, the stare is always powerful and awakening. A kind of potent social choreography, staring marks the body of the staree and enacts a dynamic visual exchange between a spectator and a spectacle. A certain symmetry inheres in the staring encounter in that it grants a preemptive agency to the starrer but it also endows the staree with the ability to seize the attention and to hold in thrall the starrer. The novel snares our eye and holds it helpless.

## Faces and the Staring Relationship

We stare with and at faces to know each other and the world. Faces mark our distinctiveness and particularity, highlight our appearance and look, indicate emotion and character, and display our dignity and prestige. The staring relationship is most complex and nuanced at the level of faces. Directly staring at one another is an intense, prolonged, and meaning-laden interpersonal looking that almost always edges into the socially inappropriate. The rawest and most fundamental form of staring is face-to-face encounter, which is sometimes a random, idiosyncratic individual confrontation with another person and at other times a highly structured social ritual driven by the collective impulse to stare.

So essential is the face to human interaction and being that it anchors much of our language. Because humans turn to their own bodies to understand the world, our facedness provides a rich source of collective meaning. Metaphoric extensions of face abound. Complex ideas are summarized through facial metaphors such as long, straight, poker, or iron faces. Phrases subtle and abundant in meaning call on the face. An insult is a slap in the face; futility renders us blue in the face; failed endeavors blow up in your

face; defiance flies in the face; repentance is saving face; a betrayer is two-faced; the anonymous are faceless; friends and loved ones are familiar faces; the humiliated lose face; the embarrassed are shamefaced; the angry are in your face; the rejected must get out of your face; to enter the social world is to show your face; to express ourselves we make a face. The orienting aspect of the face has been spun out into expressive verbs, as well. Punishment is facing the music; honesty is facing up to it; confronting is facing it down; to conflict is to face off; to ruin is to deface. Individual facial features yield vivid and succinct expressions. We eye something we want, get an earful, nose around, keep our chins up and our noses to the grindstone. We can be cheeky, mouthy or nosey.

Our faces and their features are implements of communication, emblems of identity, and interpretive occasions; they are privileged sites from which recognition emanates in both directions of human encounter.<sup>2</sup> As such, our faces belong both to us and to others. They can be used by us and against us. Faces reveal our thoughts and feelings. Eyes cry, brows knit, mouths gape, lips grin, cheeks blush, jaws clench, and pupils dilate with libidinal enthusiasm. Faces unveil our roots. Hair texture, skin pigmentation, eye, nose, and lip shape act as cues to our places in the social systems we think of as race and ethnicity. Faces declare our histories. We wear our years, habits, and locations on our faces. Vestiges of drink, sun, sugar, stress, illness, and hard looking brand our noses, cheeks, foreheads, teeth, and eyes. Faces bespeak our interiors. Characteristic facial features announce a Down Syndrome diagnosis. Widely spaced eyes correlate with schizophrenia. Bald men have more heart disease than the hirsutely headed. People who get polio tend to have large central incisor teeth (Zebrowitz, 1997). Our faces expose us to one another and set the course of human interaction.<sup>3</sup>

The staring relationship is, then, a central arena in which we recognize and misrecognize the inner lives of one another and are recognized and misrecognized in turn (see Rhodes and Zebrowitz, 2002, on facial recognition). Familiarity determines our ability to know faces. Competent, efficient facial recognition depends on encountering faces that meet certain visual expectations. In other words, an internalized facial norm shaped by culture – what psychologists call ‘norm based coding’ – determines facial legibility (Rhodes, 1994). As long as we are seeing the kinds of faces we are accustomed to coming across, visual cognition and the social relations that accompany it go smoothly. The unexpected face confounds us, presses us, makes us stare. This visual indeterminacy is more than a cognitive problem, however. Illegible faces are a social problem.

## Face Work

What the sociologist Erving Goffman (1982[1967]) calls ‘face work’ demands staring. More than simply face-to-face presence, face work involves the crucial interactive drama of recognizing and managing the particularities of all faces involved in any public encounter. Visual vigilance is key. Staring is a

sensory sorting process of determining an interpretive foreground and background, of formulating an ocular hermeneutics. Face work is a constantly dynamic, delicate dance of mutual scrutiny, adjustment, call, and response. As we visually roam our worlds, we select and discard the visages upon which to lavish our regard. The intensity and duration of our visual regard is both instrumental and contingent. Because we recognize ourselves in the faces of others, we often seek out faces we suspect will tell us what we want or need to know about who we are in the social world. In this process, we first visually identify the face with which we want to engage and then stare at it intently to discern its response to the face we have put forward. Although we are comporting our entire bodies in these encounters, our faces are the focal points of interpretation. Goffman's work (Goffman et al., 1988) emphasizes that such face work is more than simple individualized communication; rather, the ways that we stare at one another are highly ritualized ceremonies of regard that constitute anew our public personae with each staring event.

Instrumental face work is a matter of simultaneously crafting the look of our own faces and looking at the craft of the other's face. In contrast, what might be called contingent staring is intense looking that is prompted not by intentionality on the part of the viewer, but by a visual call from the compelling. This kind of staring occurs when our eye is arrested by a sight that interests us, by an object that is unfamiliar to us or by a familiar object that we are seeing in new ways. We stare in this way when we are startled or enthralled by a face. Rather than our choosing the face, the face chooses us. Sometimes a face captivates us with what is considered to be beauty, but sometimes a face captures us by way of what is thought to be the opposite of beauty, the supposed grotesque, ugly, or strange. Facial typicality may encode what we think of as attractiveness, and we may stare at it out of some primal urge toward mate selection or perhaps from being socialized about what is supposed to be attractive. However, it is the strange face that compels us to make sense of it, to figure out what it means, or to respond to it appropriately.

The complex choreography of staring and being stared at in our everyday face-to-face encounters depends, perhaps more than anything else, on everyone accurately following the rules. The conventions of comportment and conversation that govern such encounters are handed down to us as a part of the routine acculturation process that saturates us all. The degree to which we are able to conform our bodies and behaviors to the expected standards of these rituals of recognition will determine how successfully such exchanges proceed. Human faces follow the protocols of social exchange differently from one another, depending upon the vagaries of individual faces. Because our faces are the most particularized and finely read part of our bodies, facial legibility rests upon a narrow set of expectations and tolerates a limited range of variations. The rituals of public face work are most successfully performed when nothing diverges from the expected patterns, when everyone involved knows exactly the meaning of each feature and gesture. This security of signification, this ease of mutual recognition, is exactly what a typical face guarantees.

The unorthodox face throws easy recognition rituals into chaos. The visage that refuses to yield up expected configurations confounds the underlying purposes of face work. The atypical face may be unattractive to a viewer, but the most pressing crisis of the atypical face is one of meaning rather than merit. In this sense, it is the unconforming countenance that provokes a more urgent stare than the conventionally attractive face. So while the ordinary face pleases with its symmetry, proportions, and familiarity, the extraordinary face throws down a visual hermeneutic challenge to its discomforted viewer. It refuses to be a mirror, withholding both the hoped-for affirmation or dreaded condemnation the viewer seeks in the face of the other, neither confirming nor denying our social status. Face work thus goes awry. More than only interpretive collapse occurs, however, when we confront the extraordinary face. Thwarted looking intensifies into urgent staring as it grasps toward legibility, and with it comes not the sought-after recognition but the discomfort of realizing that we are staring. An interpretive crisis quickly converts to an etiquette disaster as both members of the face working dyad accumulate an uneasiness that quickly unfolds into full and mutual embarrassment. The heretofore invisible and tidily unacknowledged workings of this status ceremony have been laid open. Tripped up in this way in the midst of our familiar two-step, we are awkwardly before one another, mutually vulnerable and resourceless.

The person usually most adept at managing the staring encounter, at rescuing face work rituals, is the object of the stare. This is surprising, perhaps even counterintuitive, because our understanding of the staring relationship most often centers on the perspective of the starrer. Staring is thought of as a consequential social act, one capable of endowing meaning. Being stared at, in contrast, is imagined as being objectified or even victimized. In one sense, this is correct. And yet, being the one in the dyad who has the most to lose often prompts a staree to take charge of the situation. Goffman (1980[1967]) contends that one of the privileges of typicality is being accorded 'civil inattention' in public spaces. Visual anonymity is a form of cultural capital that allows us to orchestrate the visual encounters in which we seek to recognize and be recognized. To be accorded what might be called uncivil attention is to be targeted by the stares of others, to be engaged unwillingly in intense, uninvited face work. Goffman points out repeatedly that people who are unable to maintain a proper demeanor are the losers in face work ceremonies. In other words, those of us whose facial form or functioning violates the protocols of 'a well demeaned person' are vulnerable to the social disregard that staring confers (Goffman, 1956). According to this logic, even though staring is a form of visual attention that is essential to the social recognition we seek, staring's intensity and intrusiveness ironically reduce status rather than affirming it. More to the point, those of us with inappropriate facial demeanor – the extraordinary faced – are stranded without the tools of typicality with which the rest of us build valued versions of ourselves through face work. While Goffman is in some sense right about this status compromise that being stared at enacts, there is often more to the staring encounter than meets the eye.<sup>4</sup>

## Saving Faces

People with unusual faces have a good deal of work to do in a staring interaction. To begin with, the extraordinary face ropes in the eyes of passersby in spite of even their best intentions. Such unexpected faces startle and compel, pressing their viewers toward explanations. The more spectacularly divergent the face, the more in thrall is the hapless spectator and the more at risk is any smooth social transaction that either party hopes to achieve. The social crisis of staring emanates not so much from the unorthodox face, but more from the mutual discomfort that the starrer's urge to ogle begets. People with a good amount of experience with being stared at come to understand this and develop relational strategies to ameliorate the tension and rescue the encounter from the damage that staring inflicts. What sociologist and pioneer researcher on facial plastic surgery, Frances Cooke MacGregor (1974), calls 'face saving stratagems' constitute a hidden subtext in many studies and stories about what is generally called facial deformity or disfigurement, a characteristic that MacGregor concludes is the 'most devastating of social handicaps' (pp. 25–6). The unusually faced, it seems, take charge of the staring encounter, using charm, friendliness, humor, formidability, or perspicacity to both reduce interpersonal tension and cultivate their own personal assets. Rather than passively wilting under the intrusive and discomforting stares of their astonished viewers, these extraordinarily faced people expertly manage the staring encounters to achieve their own ends.

A closer examination of the staring relationship raises questions, however, about whose face is being saved in these delicately orchestrated and discomforting interactions. When our perspective shifts from the normative point of view of the starrer to the standpoint of those whose faces startle, a different story emerges. In what he calls the challenge of 'changing faces', James Partridge (1990) reveals the potential for exercising agency, enacting a positive representation of oneself, and commanding relations with the other that can grow out of the staring encounter. Partridge, who himself has a significantly unusual face, offers a unique account of face work from the staree's perspective. He begins his practical advice to the newly enfaced by straightforwardly acknowledging the unusual face's capacity to catapult both the hapless and intentional, both the sympathetic and the hostile, viewer into a wide-eyed stare. 'Your starers', Partridge advises new starees, will be unable 'to hide their shock and concern . . . It is your job to help them overcome this.'

The face to be saved in staring encounters is not the face of the staree, but the face of the starrer. While having a face that violates appearance standards targets one as a spectacle, the loss of self-possession and often inadvertent breach of social etiquette inherent in the stare mark the startled viewer as vulnerable and inappropriate. In his critique of facial aesthetics, Georg Simmel (1964) observes that gaping and staring are 'particularly unaesthetic' expressions because they indicate 'spiritual paralysis, the momentary absence of spiritual control'. The enthrallment of staring thus renders the

starer herself an unattractive object whose social status at least momentarily sags. The person who is a surprising spectacle, then, has the opportunity to exercise the social generosity of allowing the starrer to maintain face. Partridge sagely remarks on the essential dynamic the facially different must employ when being looked at by others: 'They have usually come to help you, but you may well find that you have to help them.' Staring is not simply a one-way act of intense looking, then, but rather a complex process of social choreography between two individuals.

The first element in the staring process is for the staree to develop a keen sense of being scrutinized. This anticipation and preparedness arms the staree with the proper relational tools to manage expected staring encounters with great effectiveness. The second element in this process is to decide how to oversee the dynamics of the stare itself when it inevitably comes one's way. If one looks directly at starers, it will only confuse or embarrass them. The staree must assess the precise attitude of the starrer, measuring intentions and attitudes so as to respond in the most effective way. Facilitating your starers' maintenance of face means relieving them of anxiety, understanding their motivations, and working with them to overcome their limited understanding of human variation and their social awkwardness at facing it. The third element is literally manipulating the eyes of the starrer. One evaluates when to turn away, stare back, or further extend the stare. Sometimes it is best to allow the staring to go on in order for the starrer to get a good look. Another procedure is to use eye contact and body language to terminate the stare as soon as possible, although this risks being interpreted as hostile. Another option is to redirect the stare. For example, some starees report using their own eyes to guide the starrer's immobilized eyes away from the part of their body that has captured the gaze, subtly rescuing the hapless viewer from the embarrassment of the stuck stare and restoring the ritual of casual face-to-face encounters. Finally, the staree can and often must enlist conversation to direct the staring process. Staring has an inherent narrative component that the staree must always address in some way. Partridge offers: 'You will have to keep up the conversation until you judge it right to help them ask the big question: What happened to you?' (Partridge, 1990; Garland-Thomson, 2000). Of course, the staree will have a variety of ready and fluent answers to this urgent question, what Partridge calls 'this inquisition', that can be drawn from in order to set the interaction in the direction that it needs to go next (Partridge, 1990). Without such a clarifying narrative, the stare itself is often open to multiple interpretations, which give the staree flexibility in both understanding and managing the situation. Nevertheless, once both the visual and the narrative aspect of the staring process have been properly addressed by the staree, social relations can proceed properly. Staring, then, is an artful preamble to regularized face-to-face social interactions. It is also a minority preamble, conducted adroitly only by the experienced staree.

More than maintaining the starrer's face, staring encounters provide the unusually faced with an opportunity for self-development. Since face work is more exacting for them, they must learn to cultivate ways of conveying

themselves to others. The curiosity that motivates staring demands that one fashion varied narratives of the self to mobilize depending upon one's purposes. Rather than causing narcissism, having an unorthodox face takes one out of one's self because of the responsibility to the other that comes from having to justify one's embodiment to the world. Moreover, the staring encounter can be productive rather than oppressive; the open-ended aspect of staring interactions creates a social space of great possibility. Since the introduction of staring violates received and usually unquestioned social conventions, a productive unruliness can ensue when the predictable structure of face work gives way. Partridge posits, for instance, that the starrer is actually frightened by the staree. To enlist the potency bestowed by someone's fear and convert it into a form of personal authority inflected by either generosity or command can enlarge the self in ways that are psychologically beneficial and socially effective. What Partridge calls 'successfully bring[ing] some people back from their recoil' or 'turn[ing] the sympathy to constructive uses' requires a substantial psychological acuity and facility. Having a stareable face can shape one in more profoundly positive and productive ways as well. The philosopher Jürgen Habermas recently wrote, for example, that the experience of having a cleft palate and the accompanying multiple surgeries positively shaped his intellectual development. Habermas explains that the biological roots of his important life work analyzing public space and the political public sphere arose in large part from being the object of public scrutiny because of his unusual face.<sup>5</sup> Such face work and the loss of comfortable civil inattention are certainly taxing and often tedious or tormenting for the staree. Nevertheless, the staring process can be a generative arena from which creative interpersonal skills and deep wells of sustenance emerge.

## David Roche

An expert in the management of staring relationships, the humorist and keynote speaker, David Roche, has built a career from the visual prominence of his unorthodox face. A comedian, storytelling coach, and public speaker, Roche makes a living and a life by deliberately invoking stares and crafting the ensuing encounters on his own terms and for his own purposes. There is a resourcefulness in his performances and writings that not only makes a virtue from necessity but turns trauma into generosity. Like Partridge's advice book, *Changing Faces* (1990), Roche's body of literary work offers a much more nuanced understanding of the staring relationship than do any social scientific studies on the topic. Veering occasionally into the predictable rhetoric of inspiration – perhaps to address the realities of marketing himself as a performer – Roche's work nevertheless is profoundly complex, insightful, and often lyrical. His message, which is neither buried in the usual distancing irony of the humorist nor obscured by high literary devices, is that forms of embodiment taken to be so idiosyncratic as to be monstrous and on the very edge of human identification can in fact be productively coaxed toward universality. 'His stories reveal', his website tells us, 'that his face is

unique, but his experiences and message are universal' and that his 'warm humor' comes from his 'deep understanding of human frailty' [<http://www.davidroche.com/index.htm>]. The frailty, we come subtly to see through his stories, is not his unique countenance but rather the frailty of human imagination that the compelling visual entanglement between Roche and his startled viewers exposes.

Roche's performances stage staring, anticipating its predictable patterns and intensifying them for dramatic and thematic effect. Recognizing the continuity for him between the stage and the street, Roche tells us, 'I am a one-man show, both on stage and off.' 'When I walk on stage', Roche writes, 'the audience says with one voice: "What happened to your face?" I have encouraged them to say this', he goes on, 'so I then explain . . . ' [<http://www.davidroche.com/about.htm>]. Enthralled, the audience is all his, their eagerness to comprehend such novelty so acute that no one can turn away. The expected narrative about finding his own inner beauty and strength from what seems to be a flaw coexists with more radical and less predictable lines such as, 'I am proud to be part of the emerging culture of disability' or stories that politely let us know he is sexually active and attractive [<http://www.davidroche.com/about.htm>]. Humor – what Roche calls 'the most subversive of the arts' – has the effect of transforming the expected staring encounter from one of mutual discomfort and standard responses ranging from surprise to horror on the part of the starrer into a didactic, philosophical, or aesthetic opportunity that Roche skillfully conducts. Roche has harnessed the power of the stare to his own ends, which are intentionally benevolent, in part as a contradiction to the stereotype of the vengeful or evil monster that haunts his humanity. Despite the generosity and kindness that pervade his public persona, Roche's humor never partakes of the slapstick or imploring which is often associated with clowns or blackface minstrelsy, two other groups of performers who use exaggerated enfacement as rhetorical tools in performances. Instead, his wit is dry and ironic, securing for himself the authority and dignity that prejudice against people with appearance impairments often obscures.

Roche's most incisive and detailed account of staring comes in a longer written piece called 'Finding My Voice' (1999–2006). Here, Roche suggestively recounts his experience of undergoing what Michel Foucault calls 'the clinical gaze'. His story begins in the structured arena of the medical waiting room, which has pulled together a variety of people out of their ordinary social context and sorted them into the totalizing category of the facially pathological. Such spatial diagnosis sets everyone on edge by muting their individuality and highlighting their supposedly grim and dire commonality. Of the waiting room, Roche avows, 'I was never more conscious of my disfigurement' ('Finding My Voice' [<http://www.davidroche.com>]). But the waiting room part of his story is only the introduction, the textual foyer, so to speak. The grand ballroom of the story, to continue the spatial metaphor, is one of the medical theater.<sup>6</sup> In the interest of scientific progress and in exchange for excellent medical treatment, Roche has made something of the Faustian bargain by putting his face on display before a team of doctors as a

pathological spectacle. In doing so, Roche enters into the contradictory position of being at once a human subject and a human specimen.

The stares directed at him in the examination room where he is photographed and later in the medical amphitheater are diagnostic. Such exposure generates ‘conflicting feelings’ of ‘shame mixed with a bit of exhibitionism’ (Roche, 1999–2006). He has seen the faces in medical photographs before, recognizing there the ‘look of dissociation and fear, helplessness and resignation’ but also ‘the glow of anger’. ‘They are the eyes’, he tells us, ‘of people like me, who also were specimens on display.’ In the actual medical theater where Roche is exhibited before a team of diagnosticians, a flurry of looks and expressions are exchanged. The participants in this ritual read one another’s faces according to their stakes in the larger endeavor of which this is the visual component. Upon entering the amphitheater full of his starers, Roche begins to assess the visual dynamics, to ‘observe and classify them according to facial expression and posture’. Understanding their hierarchies and purposes is a psychological preparation for him so that he can absorb their stares:

Physicians and dentists are drawn back, more objective and assessing. Social workers nod to convey their understanding and warmth. They seek eye contact. Surgeons have the least emotional affect. They peer more closely, with narrowed eyes that search incessantly, not for eye contact but for incision sites. A couple of the younger ones flushed slightly when I look at them; they have not yet learned to mask their faces well.

But this reciprocal looking gives way as the visual medical interrogation intensifies. Roche’s medical history is read by the head of the clinic who takes and answers all questions about Roche’s face. This inquisition is entirely visual. The official pathological narrative of Roche’s face delivered by the doctor trumps all of his other histories. ‘My role was to be observed’, he concludes. ‘This was where I received my medical education, where I learned about my condition.’ The next act in this medical drama augments staring with touching. As the doctors proceed to scrutinize Roche’s face, his subjectivity and humanity shrink. ‘Their territory had been established’, he writes, ‘if our eyes met, it was only for a nanosecond before theirs turned away with an easy, practiced avoidance. My face no longer belonged to me.’ Roche’s almost hypnotic response to this detached, impersonal, yet gentle, clinical intimacy is to enter a protective ‘hibernative state’ where the ‘sensations were not frightening, but familiar and even sweet’. The final act of this intense visual drama is conducted by Roche. When the clinic head pronounces at the end of the examination that Mr Roche has made ‘an excellent adjustment’, the heretofore mute and compliant face finds its voice and shifts the staring dynamic profoundly. A ‘short bark erupted from [his] throat’ and with tight chest and roaring ears, he explodes to his own surprise at the wide-eyed director, ‘don’t talk to me about adjustment! You don’t know! You don’t know! Touch . . . my tongue. You never . . . you never talk

about feelings . . . or anything!’ The astonished doctors stare, but their former clinical stare is transformed by Roche’s all too human outburst. Now they are ‘locked into a combination of shock and scientific observation’. While the drama of staring belonged to Roche for a moment, the doctor quickly regains medical authority by looking directly at him, pronouncing yet another pathology – ‘perhaps you would like a referral to a psychiatrist, Mr Roche?’ Having snatched back control of the encounter, the doctor briskly terminates the drama, resolves the tension, restores the status quo, and dismisses the patient. And yet, Roche gets the last word in this staring scene. Although both the visual and narrative registers of the clinical inquisition are closed by the doctor in charge, Roche carries his vocal eruption beyond the Hemangioma Clinic and out into the world. At that moment, he tells us, ‘I began my career as a performer and public speaker.’ In this way, Roche exchanges the medical theater for the public stage, transforming the clinical stare into the performative stare, conducted not by the doctors but indisputably by himself.<sup>7</sup>

## Lori and Reba Schappell

The remarkable 1999 documentary, *Face to Face: The Schappell Twins*, can likewise be seen as a meditation on the staring relationship. The presenting subject of Ellen Weissbrod’s groundbreaking but modest documentary is the conjoined twin sisters, Lori and Reba Schappell, who were in their late 30s when the film was made. The documentary concerns the sisters’ debut into the public world.<sup>8</sup> As such, it is about their relationship with staring. On the most literal level, the film acquaints its viewers both visually and narratively with Lori and Reba’s unusual enfacement and the embodied way of being in the world that emanates from it. The twins are facially conjoined so that their faces and perhaps a quarter of their skulls are merged and shared just above Reba’s right eye and Lori’s left eye. Each has about three quarters of her own separate face and each shares one eye and the quadrant above it with her sister. This quite extraordinary configuration necessitates that the sisters always remain face-to-face, but the angle of their conjoinment at the same time precludes them from actually seeing one another’s faces. They relate to one another, then, more through touch than sight. Their perpetual contiguity invites an almost constant embrace between them, which manifests itself in much tender mutual grooming and petting, as well as an alternately sweet and spunky girliness toward one another. They giggle, bicker, snipe, encourage, and whisper loving prompts to one another. Mutual support is literally the mode of their relationship. Although they are genetically identical, as are all conjoined twins, Reba is significantly smaller and does not walk as a result of spina bifida. One of the resourceful adaptations they have devised to live together in a world built for embodiments other than theirs is for the delicate Reba to sit on a kind of rolling bar stool that is propelled by the sturdier Lori as she moves along. Attached and identical as they are, Reba and Lori have quite different temperaments, aspirations, and tastes. Reba, the feistier of the sisters, is a

redheaded country and western singer with a fierce sense of independence, although not from Lori. Lori, with her simple brown haircut and sensible shoes, wants to work in a hospital and have a family. Although they imagine different careers, different lifestyles, and different pleasures, their attachment to one another, both fleshly and familiarly, is never questioned by either woman. They are committed to accommodating one another in ways that go beyond the imagination of any pair of ordinary singleton partners.<sup>9</sup> Their conjoinment affords them an occasion for a resourceful adaptability to new or unobliging environments that in those of us for whom the world is conveniently structured could atrophy or dull with disuse.

The other aspect of face work that Weissbrod's documentary addresses, and the one of greatest pertinence here, is that of the Schappell twins' starers. The film emphatically focuses upon the starers rather than the object of their stares. The film's project is to make the viewers visually comfortable with the Schappell twins and to humanize them, presenting Lori and Reba most often in the context of the staring relationship where we see the entire staring dynamic played out in the filmic frame. The twins cruise through the public realm with great poise, confidence, and good cheer, narrating their own lives, experience, and opinions. Their myriad of first-time viewers, however, are awestruck, stopped in their tracks with mouths agape and eyes anxiously out of control. The film's conceit is that we singleton viewers have gotten accustomed to and quite charmed by Reba and Lori so that, when the many interviewed starers reveal their own prejudices and lack of imagination in their comments about the twins, we initiated find ourselves smirking at their naiveté and bias. Like the twins long-term friends, we have come to find them unexceptionable and indeed lovable. Thus, this radical and unique film is less about the Schappell twins and more about the world from their point of view. The disadvantage in the staring encounters that the film documents clearly goes to the hapless and tiresome singletons. The spunky and practiced conjoins, in contrast, work the crowd with measured equanimity and dignity.

Not that managing stares is easy. The twins are virtuosas of every strategy that Partridge advises. They anticipate and choreograph staring encounters, often instructing the more intrusive gawkers how to handle themselves appropriately. Reba brandishes a tourist's camera that she uses to stare back at her visual interlocutors. At the same time, she firmly informs people who try to take pictures of her and Lori that they must obtain Lori's permission to be photographed. Reba adds wryly that because she is a country singer, they are free to photograph her as a celebrity.<sup>10</sup> With some indulgence and often strained patience, the twins understand that their startled viewers' loss of composure and social grace is a result of their ignorance of the intricacies of human variation and of alternative ways of being in the world. Ironically, regardless of the 24 years they spent in forced institutionalization, they are in this sense more worldly and psychologically sophisticated than their starers. They have also come to relish being a spectacle to a certain degree, cultivating as a form of celebrity what could be, and often is, unwanted attention. Part of their social management accomplishment is to present

themselves to an often hostile and certainly uncomprehending world as compelling rather than inspirational. They adamantly refuse to be patronized or pitied. Instead they prefer to be respected and even liked. They carefully oversee their self-presentation to head off narratives of inspiration or sympathy that are the usual fare relentlessly handed to people with significant visible disabilities.

## Ways of Staring

By probing the staring narratives of Roche and the Schappell twins, we can begin to formulate a taxonomy of staring: arrested, separated, and engaged staring. The unexpected face summons not just stares but a diversity of looks and counterlooks that give texture to staring encounters. This variegation within staring situations emerges most clearly when one focuses on the staree's perspective rather than the starrer's. Much of this range of intense looking is determining the motivation of the starrer.

The initial common form of intense looking can be called arrested staring. Here, the starrers' surprise and confusion in response to a visual conundrum is expressed through arrested comportment and frozen astonishment. Such interpretive and embodied fixedness – commonly thought of as gawking – is considered unseemly social behavior. Such failures of bodily command are particularly egregious violations of social interaction rules in our individualistic, self-regulating society. The blocked intentionality that comes with arrested staring occurs most often when an unexpected face appears with no preparatory context. In anonymous public spaces, for instance, we usually neither seek nor anticipate unintended novel experiences, but rather tacitly agree to grant one another mutual civil inattention. Unless our task is explicit people-watching, with its attendant intentional aimlessness, we are unprepared for what may seem to be the visual assault of a face that strains our ability to make sense of it. With eye askance, demeanor amok, and mission derailed, the flummoxed traveler freezes in mid stride, dazed and confused before the extraordinary face. It is, then, not the atypical face itself that makes scenes of staring socially straining; the trouble instead lies with the disrupted spectator.

Sometimes the arrested stare persists for an uncomfortably long period of time so that the staree needs to take some action to release everyone from the uneasiness of the staring encounter. For example, the Schappell twins often speak directly to their rapt lookers by reminding them that staring is not polite or by offering some comment that normalizes themselves to the viewers. The twins often kindly and usually firmly instruct their onlookers that the 'problem' is not their faces, but rather one that belongs to the 'world'. Of their starrers, one twin says, 'They have to get used to it.' Their faces are only 'an abnormality from the way they are used to living' (*Face-to-Face*, 1999). This spoken intervention releases the optically stuck from their visual grasp and allows them to move back into the proper field of civil inattention.

A second form of looking is what Roche calls 'separated' staring. Whereas arrested staring halts the spectator, separated staring is a visual fleeing. It is often the wide-eyed, looking-over-one's-shoulder retreat of the fearful. Roche offers his audience a psychological understanding of their urge to stare at his face. Having created the opportunity to talk back to his starers, he assumes an authority arising from deeper psychic understanding, addressing them somewhat accusingly, 'You are afraid because our faces stir that deep fear that comes lurching out of your unconscious, the raw fear that you are disfigured perhaps' (Roche, 1999–2006). He goes on to turn their fearful stares away from him and onto themselves:

When you step out of the shower and stand naked in front of the mirror, where does your gaze fall? Do you notice body parts that may be unattractive, even disgusting to others? Do you turn away from your own image? Or perhaps your disfigurement is internal – some character flaw, some habit. Or perhaps something was done to you. Something you feel ashamed of.

Having returned their fear to them, he clinches the dramatic accusation by characterizing his role as the object of their stares as a form of psychic service that he is performing for them: 'That's my job, to carry the weight of that fear for you, so that you can pretend that you are normal.' Roche thus transforms the separated fearful stare of his wary onlookers into an engaged meditation on their own anxiety about being seen as flawed. Speaking for the larger community of starees, Roche puts forth a pronouncement of spectatorship: 'We know that you turn away, not from our faces, but from your selves, from your own fears.' So by accepting their stares, Roche artfully turns them back on themselves.

Sometimes separated staring is born of fastidiousness. It is a visual pushing away by those who cannot bear the surprising particularities of stark human embodiment. These are the easily repulsed, the people who blanch at the purplish scar, the cataract-clouded eye, or the vivid and intricate birthmark. Frances MacGregor (1974) calls this 'aesthetic rejection', concluding that faces are the most vulnerable parts of our bodies to this ostracism. In its most virulent form, this kind of separated staring expands into revulsion. In the documentary *Face-to-Face* (1999), for example, some viewers of the Schappell twins found the women's presence in violation of their right to not have to look at something they did not find pleasing. More than offended, they declare their holiday ruined by Lori and Reba's entry into it. This appeal to the fastidious is not infrequently made by diners who claim ruined meals and squandered expenses because people with disabilities are allowed to dine alongside them. The fastidious find a visual novelty unsettling and are most comfortable with the dulling of perception that a look of normalcy begets.

The most malignant form of separated staring is hostile spectatorship. Contrary to conventional wisdom about the charming innocence and inherent gentleness of children, many unusually enfacéd people pronounce

children to be the most distressing starers. One staree reports that children about the ages of 4 or 5 are by far the most likely starers. Another staree – this one armed with the wisdom from years of managing stares – tells of being spat on, screamed at, and accused of being ‘the ugliest thing he had ever seen’ by a very young man on the street in San Francisco. Although stunned, the target of this attack concluded that insecurity and lack of self-esteem led to such raw cruelty. Such a subtle logic understands this kind of separated staring as simply puerile vengeance and a deficiency of empathy, a deep failure of the human generosity that comes perhaps with years of life experience.

In contrast to separated staring, sometimes the arrested stare shifts to a look that is enlivened with intent. Such staring can be called engaged looking. In a very positive version of this shifting, David Roche’s on-stage performances hasten the movement away from the arrested stare into the didactic, engaged stare that he intends his audience to direct at him. Rather than being diminished, both Roche and the Schappell sisters have learned to be reasonably comfortable ‘mak[ing] a living by being stared at and talking about it’, as Roche sums it up. ‘This gives me a great deal of control (but it is far from being total control!) over the staring’ (personal communication, 22 September 2005). To describe such looking in spatial terms, engaged staring draws the viewer toward the object of the stare, rather than either arresting or repelling the starrer. For example, the parents of children in the waiting room in the clinic where Roche offers up his face for examination,

scrutinized me surreptitiously . . . glancing fearfully again and again and again, seeking to divine the future of their own children’s faces in mine. Their gaze held an intensity and intimacy. Their sidelong glances sought to take me in fully to simultaneously record my physical characteristics and the wholeness of my being, doing this with some degree of furtiveness, trying to absorb another human being and a sidelong glance. Their stares were not separated but engaged. (Roche, 1999–2006)

The intensity of engaged staring arises not from hostility, curiosity, or enforced distance but rather from a pressing need to know, to make sense of the epistemological challenge before one’s eyes. Engaged staring reaches out rather than shrinks back. It meets rather than dismisses. It intrudes, most often benevolently, because it is on an urgent mission for knowledge.

### Beholding: A Brief Conclusion

As a generative, albeit volatile, social relationship, staring necessarily has ethical dimensions. The fundamental question is: how can staring be ethical? In her discussion of looking at suffering, Susan Sontag (2003) asserts that although staring is an ‘unworthy desire’, its voyeurism can be redeemed through a response of sympathetic political engagement (p. 96). In her meditation on staring at beauty, Elaine Scarry (1999) likewise argues that

intense looking initiates an interactional, active ‘compact’ between perceiver and perceived (p. 90). Both Sontag and Scarry’s analyses are in concert with the understanding offered here of staring as the cognitive struggle on the part of this staree to forge coherence from the inexplicable. Staring is a state of being arrested by and in thrall to the extraordinary. Most importantly, Sontag and Scarry each suggest that staring between humans can be an ethically productive relationship only if the arrested stare transforms into an engaged rather than separated stare. Whether we are viewing human suffering or terrible human beauty, intense looking is a good thing when it promotes attentive identification between viewer and viewed; it is a bad thing when it satisfies salacious curiosity or leads us into the ethical cul de sac of *schadenfreude*. We might conclude then that ethical staring is a matter of beholding, of an arrested stare transforming into identification instead of differentiation.<sup>11</sup> In other words, staring might be reconceived as a visual manifestation of the Winnicottian (1960) holding function. The radical besiegement of both starrer and staree in such an intense visual encounter holds an unexpected opportunity for mutual transformation.

## Notes

1. I intend to differentiate the stare from the gaze, about which there exists a long conversation that stretches, among others, from Sartre (2001[1943]) through Foucault (1975) and on to its most complex development in feminist film theory. Without being reductive, I will move away from the gaze because the term is overdetermined as an asymmetrical power relation between a largely predatory viewer and victimized viewed. In elaborating a theory of the stare, I want to concentrate on the productive mutuality of this visual social relationship.
2. Twentieth-century philosophers and writers have been concerned with the imperatives of the generalized face of the other. The 20th-century theologian Martin Buber (1958[1923]), for example, understands human face-to-face interaction as key to divine knowledge. In his formulation of the ‘I and Thou’ dyad through which God is enacted, the obligation embodied in the face of our fellow humans is the manifestation of God. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1969, 1987) posits that the face makes ethical demands on its viewer. For Buber and Levinas, the faces of others beckon and bond us morally to one another. For the intransigently godless philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, faces threaten to overwhelm us and alienate us from one another. In his famous caught-peeping-through-the-keyhole scenario (Sartre, 2001[1943]), surveillance trumps recognition in facial encounters. Rather than vivifying, recognition enervates.
3. The countenance as a site of revelation has a long history in human thought and practice. Physiognomy, the art and science of face reading, of divining character from facial contours, has its roots in classic western thought. Ancient Chinese, Persians, and Romans believed that faces revealed a person’s essence. Aristotle’s *Historia Animalium* (Peck, 1965) has six sections on physiognomy. Although the general idea that the face reveals character persisted widely, the practice was codified as a science and named in the late 18th century by Johann Caspar Lavater, who made great claims for its revelatory truth value. Lavater’s physiognomy fused the emerging concept of science with the ancient spiritual practice of reading the appearances of things in the material world as an index

of the divine world. Like democratic thought, physiognomic thought universalized people by offering a generalizable taxonomy by which we all could intuitively judge the value of our fellow human beings. Physiognomy, then, evolved as a way to rope in human particularity – as manifest in the face – by submitting it to a scheme of predictable interpretation (see Hartley, 2001, and McNeill, 1998).

4. For more on this idea, see Gilman (1998, 1999).
5. See Habermas' lecture at [[http://homepage.mac.com/gedavis/JH/Kyoto\\_lecture\\_Nov\\_2004.pdf](http://homepage.mac.com/gedavis/JH/Kyoto_lecture_Nov_2004.pdf)]
6. On the medical theater of anatomy, particularly in an early modern era, see Sawday (1995).
7. All quotes in this and the above paragraph reference Roche's essay 'Finding My Voice' [[http://www.davidroche.com/Finding My Voice'.htm](http://www.davidroche.com/Finding_My_Voice.htm)]. For more on Roche, see also his award-winning documentary, *The Perfect Flaw: Triumphant over Facial Disfigurement* (2002).
8. The Schappell twins were institutionalized in a hospital for the developmentally and intellectually disabled for the first 24 years of their lives. Reba, with the support of the hospital staff and the First Lady of Pennsylvania, Ginny Thornburgh, pushed for their independence much more assiduously than Lori. Although they were institutionalized from birth, they apparently were not abandoned by their family, who visited regularly and most probably made the decision to institutionalize them based on medical advice and the lack of an accessible environment for them. Part of the rationale for their institutionalization was that it was repeatedly predicted that their condition was not compatible with life, and that they were expected to die soon, as is not an unusual diagnosis for people with significant and rare disabilities. (Harriet McBryde Johnson writes about this constant prediction of death in her 2005 memoir.) Upon deinstitutionalization, both women immediately experienced extreme employment discrimination but have eventually come to make a living as celebrities (see Dreger, 2004).
9. The exception to this may be fetus and mother, whose conjoinment is generally mutually agreeable if not always mutually beneficial. The term 'singleton' is used by the medical historian Alice Dreger to name the kind of human being who is not conjoined. The critical work of this term is extremely important because it names a term which is considered to be so normal as to not need to be named. 'Singleton' calls attention to the minority embodiment of conjoinment by naming the previously unnamed majority term. (See again Dreger, 2004, as well as Couser's unpublished manuscript, no date.)
10. Reba, who has appeared with Lori on several television programs, has cut a single song called 'Fear of Being Alone' and has changed her name from Dori to Reba, in honor of the country singer Reba McEntyre.
11. One example of this might be beholding the suffering of the crucified Christ, which is a central image of Western culture.

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