

From Looking to Voyeurism



Dany Nobus

“Visual impressions remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused; indeed, natural selection counts upon the accessibility of this pathway ... when it encourages the development of beauty in the sexual object.” Freud’s assertion, from *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, raises questions about how looking functions as a spur to reproduction. **Dany Nobus**, who moderated the October 11 roundtable, *From Looking to Voyeurism*, pivoted from Freud’s statement to the event’s underlying question: how do we define the moment when looking becomes voyeurism? Nobus, Chair of Psychology and Psychoanalysis and Head of the School of Social Sciences at Brunel University in London, quickly answered his own question. “Looking becomes voyeurism,” he said, “when the intensity of the looking becomes sexually arousing.”

Mary Anne Doane, Professor of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University, took exception with Freud’s premise, arguing that the concept of beauty as a consequence of natural selection is inaccurate. Evoking Roland Barthes, she said, “Beauty is always a copy of a copy of a copy.” Professor Nobus endeavored to clarify her remarks, stating, “You would agree that the visual is fundamental ... it makes us all voyeurs. But you disagree that beauty facilitates voyeurism.” Professor Doane replied that looking, as opposed to touching, necessarily implies distance, calling into question its primacy as libidinal stimulation.

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Bringing the discussion to a more experiential level, **Katherine Frank**, cultural anthropologist and author of *G-Strings and Sympathy: Strip Club Regulars and Male Desire*, recounted how she worked as a dancer in strip clubs in order to examine the motivations of the clientele. Bolstering Professor Doane’s earlier remarks, Frank noted that beauty is not necessarily what inspires excitement among the men who go to strip clubs. What excites them is not sanitized beauty, but hints of the obscene, sometimes embodied in breast implants and dyed hair, and other times in a girl-next-door freshness, where imperfections create an aura of vulnerability.

In contrast to the overt display of flesh in strip clubs, designed to induce sexual arousal, Professor Nobus proposed that a true voyeur adopts a position where he is unseen and watches what he’s not supposed to watch. **Sarah Stanbury**, Professor of English at the College of the Holy Cross and author of *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England*, commented, “Voyeurism has the connotation of illegality. Part of the strip club experience is that it’s on the margin between legal and illegal.” Frank, who doesn’t necessarily classify regulars at strip clubs as voyeurs, responded, “It’s not just voyeuristic. It’s about gender relations and labor relations.”

Professor Stanbury noted that in medieval texts, accounts of looking were often religious and beatific, incorporated into a structure of ritual. The mass, she observed, is orchestrated as a voyeuristic moment, with the Eucharist as revelation. The mutilated body of Christ on a cross, she added, was portrayed as strangely pleasurable in many descriptions. Voyeurism in these contexts, she concluded, was used to organize dynamics of power between the object and the viewer.

Nobus then turned to **Saul Robbins**, a photographer who focuses his lens on the intersection between public and private experience, asking, “Is photography a culturally sanctioned form of voyeurism?” Robbins offered a somewhat cryptic response. “As a photographer,” he said, “you construct an object, and photography constructs you.” Conceding that the nature of looking through a camera and capturing an object is very much like a voyeuristic gaze, Robbins downplayed the sexual implications, noting that while he derives pleasure from his relationship with observed objects, he reserves sexual stimulation for other areas of his life. “We’re all voyeurs,” he observed, “whether we get libidinal stimulation or just derive interest,” adding that looking at photographs of a war-torn country might in fact be a form of voyeurism.

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Professor Doane emphasized that the pathology of voyeurism in a strict sense lies in the fact that there is no reciprocity between the voyeur and the exhibitionist. But rather than embodying a position of power or control, the need for anonymity is often a consequence of the voyeur’s anxiety. For example, the Jimmy Stewart character in *Rear Window* is stymied by worry and passivity. Robbins pointed out that the character is a photographer who, while surrounded by his equipment, never takes a picture.

Center Co-Director Edward Nersessian asserted that a person who goes to a strip club once or twice a year isn’t a voyeur, and that enjoying a stranger’s naked body may be part of a healthy sexual relationship. “But,” he added, “if you have to go every week or month and then masturbate and don’t have sex with your wife, that becomes a pathology.”

Questions from the audience provoked myriad interpretations of voyeurism. Is there a voyeuristic element in observing fatal accidents? Were public executions popular in medieval times because they fulfilled a voyeuristic impulse? Is the uninhibited gaze of the infant the origin of voyeurism in a non-pathological sense? Why is sexualized looking so much more accepted in gay culture? Dr. Nersessian, reflecting on how the pleasure of looking crosses into the realm of the pathological, offered a parting thought. “I don’t think voyeurism and beauty have anything to do with each other.” *A.L.*