

The Eye in the Bluest Eye: to Disempower, Resist, and Encounter with the Absolute Beauty

Nandi Wang*

Film Studies, University of Edinburg, Edinburg, the United Kingdoms, EH8 9JU

*Corresponding author. Email: s2173310@ed.ac.uk

Abstract. The white gaze is one of the survival dilemmas that African Americans have consistently faced. *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison's first novel, focuses on the eye as its central motif to probe into the physical and mental harm that black people, especially children, suffer due to the oppressive social discipline of white culture. However, her exploration grows even more complex in her analysis of the sense of rebellion exhibited by some of her characters against the violent racialized gaze and the distortions left by the beauty standard of western culture upon the perceptions of individual spectators in her novel. This thesis endeavors to analyze the three layers of meaning concentrated in the symbol of the eye in *The Bluest Eye* by restoring Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, as well as the concept of the white gaze, and thereby demonstrating Morrison's profound care for all of her black fellows. The eye is to disempower, resist, and totalize the hegemonic standard of beauty. This paper intends to reflect upon the place of gaze in the interaction between the individual and the prevalent symbolic system used within a society.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, The Bluest Eye, The Eye.

1. Introduction

Born and raised in Lorain, Ohio, Toni Morrison is a well-known African American novelist, essayist, and college professor. In 1988, Morrison won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *Beloved* and gained worldwide recognition when awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. Her works usually touch upon the harsh consequences of racism in American society, endeavoring to probe into the perplexing reasons behind this issue, which range from the external factors of social discipline and the indoctrination of racist ideology to internal problems within the African American community. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, is about the eventual destruction of a young black girl because of the violent beauty standard forced upon her in a society in which white people are racially dominant. Upon publication, this novel caused a great stir in American society. It was at once challenged and banned for its offensive language, explicit sexual material, and controversial content, including pedophilia and child molestation. However, its profound influence upon the following generations and its contributions towards fighting the deep-rooted racism of American society are undeniable.

The theory of the gaze, heatedly discussed for years, appears in varied modes in countless books, films, and consumer culture in general. Because of Morrison's positionality at the intersection of gender and race, her exploration of the eroticized and silenced black female image in the eyes of white males examines the underlying complexity of the issue with particular insight. With reference to gaze theory, this paper will examine the multiplicity of symbolism of "the eye" in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and the dynamic relations indicated through this sign between different genders, races, and ages.

The eye is the locus of interaction between people of different colors and races. Consequently, various scholars and theorists have paid great attention to its inscriptions in art and reality. The concept of the gaze, or in French, *le regard*, is mainly used in analyzing visual culture, particularly in dealing with how the audience views the people on screen. The popularity of this concept grew with the rise of postmodern philosophy and social theory. French intellectuals in the 1960s were the first to discuss the concept, namely Michel Foucault in his description of the medical gaze and Jacques Lacan in his extended analysis of the gaze's role in the mirror stage development of the human psyche.

Furthermore, the concept of the gaze extends into the framework of feminist theory, where it can address how men look at women, how women look at themselves and other women, and the effects surrounding these interactions. In the figurative and philosophical sense, the “gaze” can be described as an individual’s awareness and perception of other individuals, groups, or oneself. Jean-Paul Sartre described the gaze (or “the look”) in *Being and Nothingness*, and later, Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, developed the concept of the gaze to illustrate the dynamics of socio-political power relations and the social dynamics of societal mechanisms of discipline. The concept of the gaze is further elaborated in *The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Come)* by Jacques Derrida upon the interspecies relations between human beings and other animals, which are established by the gaze. In the psychological sense, “to gaze implies more than to look at – it signifies a psychological relationship of power” [1], in which the one who gazes is superior to the object of the gaze. In *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright asserted that “the gaze is conceptually integral to systems of power and ideas about knowledge” [2] and that to practice the gaze is to enter into a personal relationship with the person being looked at. Their work also introduces the concept of gaze into visual culture, particularly into the art of film. Based upon the previous discussion and theorization of gaze, Laura Mulvey employed this term in a feminist context and proposed the term “male gaze.” This refers to the objectification of the female image in the eyes of the male, an action which usually carries the sense of sexualizing and diminishing women. The masculine, heterosexual perspective presents and represents women as sexual objects for the pleasure of the heterosexual male viewer.

As the title *The Bluest Eye* explicitly indicates, Toni Morrison reflects upon the eye in this novel and offers insights which have since received much scrutiny by critics. Ink has flowed upon the discussion of the eye in this novel, mostly with regard to the suffering of African Americans as the victim of the white gaze and the destructiveness of a beauty that is defined by white culture and imposed upon people through an ideological apparatus such as film and advertisement. Edward Guerrero has comprehensively analyzed the various modes of “the look,” which constructs whiteness as the norm while viewing African Americans as Other. The inscription of looking relations is articulated in Toni Morrison’s novels [3]. Guerrero especially stresses the importance of Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, which she considers the fullest and most focused representation of “the look” among all her books, arguing it is the novel’s central concern.

Additionally, Malin LaVon Walther addresses Morrison’s reconsideration and critique of beauty within American culture, shifting the focus of discussion from the visual objectification of women in a gender-based construction to the hegemony of white female images in her essay on Toni Morrison’s revision of beauty. Both Guerrero and Walther consider *The Bluest Eye* a critique of the racialized gaze and western beauty standard that reveals their crippling effects and tragic consequences, in particular for a twelve-year-old black girl named Pecola Breedlove. Guerrero and Walther also repeatedly refer to mass media as the main source of beauty education in the novel, underlining it as the primary vehicle for transmitting images of beauty and assimilating people into the overall aesthetic view in American society.

However, Morrison’s representation of the black girls’ attempt to resist the white gaze and their ability to return the gaze has not been fully discussed in previous studies. The young African American children do not simply abandon themselves to passive victimization by the look but actively engage in viewing, understanding, and influencing the world around them through the gaze of their own eyes. What is more, the function of mass media is not only to transmit or assimilate individuals to a certain idea of beauty but to disempower the eye of individuals through their spectatorship. In this sense, beauty, lying in the center of the gaze, becomes one of “probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought” [4]. With an emphasis on the symbol of the eye as found in *The Bluest Eye*, the thesis will approach it from three perspectives: the eye to disempower certain people, the eye to resist, and the eye to confront as well as ultimately surrender to the images of absolute beauty on screen.

The following analysis will restore the use of an intersectionality framework to elaborate upon the entangled reasons behind the situation of Pecola Breedlove and the group of people she represents. The causes of oppression are usually linked. The concept of intersectionality is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as the interconnected inherent characteristics of social categorizations, including race, class, and gender, regarded as creating an overlapping and interdependent system of discrimination or disadvantages. The suffering of each victim from systematic oppression and discrimination is unique. However, this general framework of intersectionality can be suitably adapted to the situation of Pecola, who is disadvantaged in every sense, with regard to her gender, race, class, and age.

2. THE EYE TO disempower

The novel's principal victim is clearly a twelve-year-old black girl named Pecola Breedlove, born into a violent and impoverished family, who constantly suffers from the gaze of the white people in her community and struggles against a sense of inferiority and ugliness because of her skin. The eye, the symbolic center of this novel, becomes a place where different parties exercise power under the influence of factors including nationality, race, gender, and class. Pecola's eye is the center of this story. On the other hand, the "bluest eye" implies the inscribed power relations between white and black people and simultaneously projects its fantasized and distorted images of beauty onto the disempowered African Americans. In this novel, the white gaze reduces black skin to a symbol of ugliness and instills this groundless idea into young black children. In their eyes, they are not decent human beings but void and meaningless beings.

Every morning Pecola wakes up in a shabby cold home with an angry brother, an indifferent mother, and a drunken father. She and her friends constantly suffer from a conviction of their ugliness. Our little black narrator, Claudia, is shocked on Christmas Day by the conviction of "adults, older girls, shops, magazines, window signs—all the world" that only "a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll" is beautiful and worthy, and treasured by every girl, while their blackness is perceived as "aggressively ugly" [5]. Pecola is raised to believe that her skin makes her hideously ugly. She and her friends find nothing in their world to contradict this conviction and consequently take their ugliness for granted and live with it.

This conviction of black ugliness is repeatedly enforced through Pecola's interactions with others, including with her parents, friends, neighbors, and even strangers. Pecola attributes all her miseries, including strangers' cold eyes, her mother's indifference, and her father's bestial desire, to her skin. Maureen Peal, who is one-fourth black, appears to be friendly at first but later meanly laughs and taunts Pecola for being black and ugly. The grocer also neglects to help her because she lacks what is traditionally considered a beautiful body, which can only be white. Pecola is stricken by "the vacuum and blankness of his eye, where curiosity ought to lodge, his total absence of human recognition, and the glazed separateness" of his gaze [5]. Mr. Yacobowski's eye seems to have the power to reduce Pecola, a living girl, to an object.

Most importantly, Pecola's beloved mother Pauline refuses to be addressed as "Mother" but rather as "Mrs. Breedlove." She throws bitter words directly at her little daughter, calling her "an ugly, really ugly cross between a puppy and a dying man, with a head full of pretty hair" [5]. Pecola is in a state of constant yearning for her mother's tender attention, such as she briefly enjoyed in her childhood when Pauline would still "watch" her daughter. Now, however, instead of her own daughter, she would rather attend to a little white girl, whom she intimately calls "baby." When Mrs. Breedlove knocks Pecola down when her legs are scalded with hot juice, but soothes the "pink tears of the pretty Frozen doll baby" [5], who only had some stains on her dress, our young protagonist is shocked. This incident reinforces her conviction that only the yellow-haired and blue-eyed white baby is worthy of compliments, tenderness, and love.

These words and actions from almost everyone around her gradually weave into a suffocating net, leaving no space for Pecola to see and know her own beauty. Considering the treatment she receives, it is unsurprising that the connection between ugliness and her skin grows deeply rooted in Pecola's

heart. This conviction, as though coming from a “mysterious all-knowing master” [5], clothes Pecola with a sense of her own ugliness, and she accepts it without question. As she gradually internalizes it, it leads to a firm belief of her unworthiness and a haunting sense of self-abasement and shame. “The racialized gaze, structured by a perceived lack of the dominant skin, race or culture, reduces people’s bodies into static icons of difference” [6], and difference from the favored ones usually means inferiority, vulnerability, and ugliness. Such a perspective is repeatedly voiced to Pecola since her birth. Though she initially believes in her inherent beauty and humanity, the grown-ups say the opposite. To admit and accept her “ugliness” becomes her only option.

3. THE EYE TO resist

However, the children do not initially submit to this conviction of black ugliness. Instead, they frequently raise doubts and objections to challenge it. They enact rebellion primarily through looking, overseeing the white gaze, interpreting, and disciplining.

One can easily discern that the three little black children, Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia, respond to the prevailing conviction regarding their skin color and ugliness differently. Compared with Pecola, who is more timid and taciturn because of her miserable home environment, Frieda and Claudia react to the rebukes differently, in a much stronger, more rebellious, and disobedient manner. The look of African Americans is usually considered confrontational, as a “gesture of resistance, challenge to authority” [7]. In the politics of slavery, that is, of racialized power relations, the enslaved people are denied their right to see. Bell Hooks describes the dominating power of white supremacy as being exercised over the black people, in particular over their gaze, their power to watch [7]. Therefore, the young girls are frequently scolded or punished for “looking around.” Their action of looking carries a sense of independence; thus, it must be restricted. Their eyes are not for looking or seeing but for blankly and numbly receiving others’ gazes and opinions in a manner they are expected and compelled to do. However, this slow and gradual indoctrination of masking them with ugliness does not wreck the children’s hope or completely deprive them of the ability to look.

On the contrary, the girls still dare to disprove, hate, and challenge the eye of the privileged ones. The sisters, Frieda and Claudia, still maintain their integrity uncompromised, and boldly express their likes and dislikes. In opposition to the universal love given for the big blue-eyed baby doll, the traditionally best gift on Christmas for little girls, they view it with unconcealed hatred and disgust. They cannot love it but can critically examine it to see why all the world says it is lovable. As for Claudia, this white baby doll is nothing but a mere metal roundness [5]. Our narrator, Claudia, not only acts to remove the eyeballs and take off the head but also “laughs at the grown-ups’ outrage and their erased aloof authority” [5]. In her, the rebellious sense is much stronger than in Pecola.

Additionally, the impulse to dismember the doll is transferred to her desire to hurt the little white girls, for whom she holds no other feelings apart from indifference and the destructive impulse. Claudia and Frieda want to pinch them, especially their eyes, to see them fold in pain. In Claudia’s eyes, the typical relation between blackness and whiteness is reversed, for she yearns to watch them suffer great pain while being touched by the “gentleness” of black people’s eyes [5]. It is a straightforward denial of the prevailing conviction of black ugliness.

After witnessing Pecola being overlooked and rebuked by her mother, Claudia feels, more strongly than her fondness for Pecola, “a need for someone to want the black baby to live, just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls” [5], such as the Shirley Temples and Maureen Peals. Claudia and Frieda use love as a refuge for their violence, pretending to hold deep affection for the white baby and to give up the universal agreement on its beauty. It is despite later being informed of the wrongness of this malicious impulse and forced to learn how repulsive this violent action might be. However, Frieda and Claudia, like little warriors, fight against the powerful gaze of white people and dare to see with their own eyes.

Pecola also sees the world differently and from the beginning of this story repeatedly questions the unfair treatment she receives from those around her. The dandelion, strong and exuberant, embodies

another kind of beauty and vitality, unaccepted within the white culture but favored by Pecola, who finally finds her place in the world while owning the clumps of dandelion. While others consider them ugly weeds, removing them from their yard, she appreciates their beauty. Her affection for this plant is so deep that anger stirs in her after discovering that the dandelion is overlooked and unloved by society at large. This anger also sharpens an awareness of her own worthiness and meaning; she experiences outrage at others for their neglect and contempt of her.

However, Pecola is not as fortunate as Claudia and Frieda. She has long ago given up the idea of running away to see new pictures and new faces, as her brother, Sammy, or her friends Frieda and Claudia, have so often done, but “concealed, veiled, eclipsed behind her ugly mask, peeps out seldom” [5]. With no access to representations of another kind of beauty she favors, such as of her beloved strong dandelion, unlike Claudia and Frieda, who can find themselves in African American actors like Ginger Rogers or Greta Garbo, her resistance is in vain, and Pecola can only surrender to the universal fondness for “the bluest eye.” The violation of her father and her ensuing pregnancy is the final strike to punish and take away her disobedient eyes for seeing, which leaves Pecola with only misery, disgust against her body, and an ardent desire for self-destruction. Cholly cannot be forgiven for raping his daughter although his morbid mind originates in his early traumatic experience of being watched and mocked by two white men or, more generally speaking, his experience of the white gaze. Faced with the big, white, armed sneering men who bear witness to Cholly’s failure and impotence, the black, helpless, and vulnerable boy is deprived of his manhood and ability to look and love. Therefore, Pecola’s eye, expressing affection and hope, haunts and irritates him. Her look of love moves him to fury, for it reminds him of painful memories and his lost capacity to look back at her and return her love. Rather, Cholly wants to strangle her. Instead, he touches her leg with his foot, which serves as another way to blind and destroy her. After her pregnancy, Pecola begins to pray for a pair of blue eyes. In their resistance to the white gaze, some succeed in maintaining their integrity, while others are destroyed. Taking the sense of the minorities’ look into consideration, to blind their eyes is usually vital to exercising dictatorship over them.

4. THE EYE TO encounter with the absolute beauty

With Pecola representing a typical victim of the white gaze, Toni Morrison provides a thorough depiction of how young African Americans are made subordinate in this racist society, as well as how their look is assimilated into the dominant view, in which blackness equals ugliness. Though not without exhibiting a powerful sense of rebellion and independence, the individual’s eyes, not just of the poor children but also of the mixed-blood and even of the privileged, gradually and unconsciously lose their autonomy in their encounter with the image of “absolute beauty” absorbed from the screen, the sole beauty standard within the white culture. This loss of autonomy occurs because of the distorted pleasure of looking at and identifying with the fantasized images of beauty that abound on television, in advertisements, and in film.

References to mass media, especially to film, repeatedly appear in *The Bluest Eye*, and the characters, such as Mrs. Breedlove, receive an education of “absolute beauty” from the silver screen. Morrison uses the phrase “absolute beauty” to represent an idea that can selectively empower some and disempower others, rendering “the flawed become whole, the blind become sighted, and the lame and halt throw away their crutches” [5]. The action of looking offers the characters intense pleasure, arising from recognizing and imagining themselves dancing like the gorgeous actresses they see in the pictures. Laura Mulvey explains that the sources of pleasure in cinema arise both from looking and its reverse formation: being looked at [8]. The encounter between the individual spectator and the abstract image of beauty brings the audience joyous self-recognition and a pleasurable articulation of subjectivity. The moment of looking at others is a moment of fascination with looking at themselves. The temporary loss of their ego simultaneously reconstitutes and reinforces their ego, satisfying the human instinct of self-appreciation and self-worship. However, self-recognition can be an extravagant misrecognition at the same time.

Toni Morrison depicts two mixed-blood characters, Maureen Peal and Soaphead Church, who are the typical victims of narcissistic identification with the images transmitted through mass media, claiming their assumed whiteness and superiority. The looking relationship delineated in *The Bluest Eye* is dynamic and changing, where the essential and the inessential, or the self and the other, are not fixed. For example, skin color is a spectrum, in which there is no such thing as the whitest or the blackest skin. Maureen is proud of her beauty and mocks the other black girls who want their hair done like Hedy Lamarr's while not having hair like hers. As for Soaphead Church, a "Reader Adviser and Interpreter of Dreams" [5], he is raised in a family proud of its mixed blood whose family members always try to marry other light-skinned people. He maintains the superiority of his skin through delusions of grandeur and is convinced of his ability to work miracles like God. His education enables him to use sophisticated, flowery, but melodramatic language to blame God for his failure to fulfill his responsibility and to justify himself with hypocritical claims of good and pure intentions. His moral failures and the art of self-deception gradually develop into a fascination and revulsion for dirt and decay, and later into his morbid sexual impulses toward young girls. The urgent claim of people like Maureen and Soaphead for their superiority implies their deep-rooted self-doubt and denial of who they are. The disparity between their real incompetence and high expectations for themselves due to having mixed-blood, as well as their deeply knowing this fact, results in distorted perspectives and more serious hatred towards the less favored.

The visual pleasure of narcissistic recognition drives them to pursue and claim an image of perfection. Some might argue that the false pride and the urgent claim for whiteness of those with mixed blood can be attributed to the white gaze, which exclusively worships whiteness and "cleanness." However, this impractical and self-deceptive desire for cinematic beauty has also extended into Hollywood's "star system," which has distinguished itself in the representation of ego ideals [8]. In the 1940s and 1950s, the major studios of America were obsessed with creating stars like Hedy Lamarr or Shirley Temple, who are mentioned in the story. Major motion picture companies usually provide the actors with extravagantly luxurious lives, like those of the characters the actors often portray in the movies. The goal is to bring the perfect characters on screen into reality and to submerge the audiences in filmic verisimilitude. However, unlike what the public knew about their magnificent villas or jewelry, many stars indulged in gambling, drug, or other addictive behaviors and often suffered from mental disorders.

In this sense, the created stars are no different from Maureen or Soaphead, for none of them has the bluest eye or the whitest skin. All of them are victims of absolute beauty. The relatively whiter or otherwise prettier ones are empowered and placed in a favored position, which instead imbues them with a false sense of superiority and renders them unable to properly "see" themselves. Their self-esteem is shattered in encounters with varied expressions of the alluring cinematic fantasy. No one can escape from the trap of homogenous beauty.

The eye, the core of the gaze, becomes the place where the individual spectator encounters and internalizes the general idea of absolute beauty. Such a standard of beauty is unrealistic, like the existence of the bluest eye that Pecola doubts at the end of the story. The silver screen leaves a false and unrealistic impression upon people that the images they see are real and achievable. Consequently, for people lacking blue eyes, surrendering to assimilated desires and unattainable beauty is their only option; otherwise, only destruction awaits.

5. Conclusion

In the novel *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison offers a comprehensive analysis of the eye on three levels. The white gaze designates others as the ones who are different and deems difference as ugliness or inhumanness. Simultaneously, the unprivileged still dare to challenge the gaze and look back in a spirit of rebellion. However, the eye of these little black girls, who are the most vulnerable and powerless under the multiple gazes, is bound to be blinded when confronted with the hegemonic fantasy of absolute beauty. Both the white and male gazes are products of a single aesthetic standard and social

discipline. The struggle of individuals is bound to fail when confronted with the prevailing symbolic system of their society.

References

- [1] J. E. Schroeder. "Consuming Representation: A Visual Approach to Consumer Research," *Representing Consumers: Voices, Views, and Visions*, B. B. Stern (ed), Routledge, 1998, pp: 193-230
- [2] M. Sturken, & L. Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Oxford University Press, 2018
- [3] E. Guerrero, "Tracking 'The Look' in the Novels of Toni Morrison." *Black American Literature Forum*, 24(4), 1990, pp: 761-773. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3041801>
- [4] B. Christian, "The Race for Theory." *Culture Critique* 6, (1987), pp: 51-63 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354255>
- [5] T. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, Vintage Books, 2007
- [6] C. Columpar, "The Gaze as Theoretical Touchstone: The Intersection of Film Studies, Feminism Theory and Postcolonial Theory." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 30.1/2, (2002), pp: 25-44J.
- [7] B. Hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." *Media Studies: A Reader*, S. Thornham (Ed), Edinburgh University Press, 1999, pp: 462-470
- [8] L. Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Koenig Books, 2016
- [9] L. Wallowitz, "Chapter 9: Resisting the White Gaze: Critical Literacy and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*." *Counterpoints* 326(9), 2008, pp: 151-164.
- [10] M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Penguin Books, 1991
- [11] Derrida, *The Animal that therefore I am*. Fordham University Press, 2008
- [12] M. L. Walther: "Out of Sight: Toni Morrison's Revision of Beauty." *Black American Literature Forum* 24, 1990, pp: 775-789 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3041802>