

Watching the Detective Watching Light

Note: This essay stems from a short conversation with [anemonesque](#) (who mentioned that Light never looks at Misa when he's acting the part of the love interest). A draft version of this essay is posted at <http://phalanstere.livejournal.com/10503.html>.

The following are thoughts on how the gaze is used in *Death Note*, and how it can be used to analyse the L-Light-Misa balance of power, and facilitate a queer reading of L and Light.

Additionally, I base some of my thoughts on academic works by [Laura Mulvey](#) and [Michel Foucault](#).

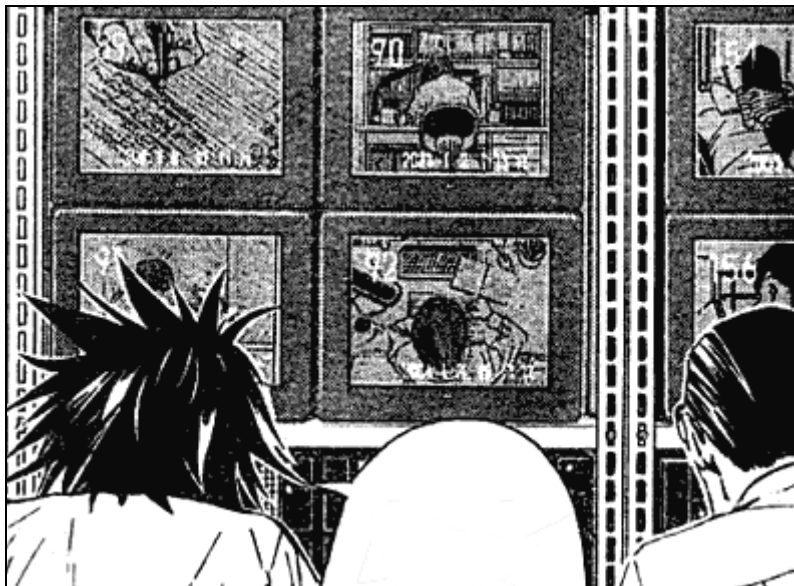
Gaze

Light, L, and Misa have different ways of looking. L's gaze is partly aided by technology; Misa's is conferred by otherworldly means; Light protects his power by hiding his gaze. Foucault equated visibility with knowledge, and knowledge with power. He stated that the more visibility a person has, the more readily s/he may be controlled by the ones in power. This is true of characters in *Death Note*; with Light, visibility can mean 'high-profile' cases and crimes. The more infamous the crime, the more likely that Light will judge the criminal. With Misa, visibility is literal. She can judge as long as she can see a person clearly. Knowing that Kira has this limitation, L orders the NPA members to destroy all existing photos of themselves.

However, the most powerful gaze in the manga is that of the shinigami. With shinigami eyes, a gaze is *instantly* empowering: one can kill with a glance, given the right circumstances. This is why Misa tells Rem that Kira cannot harm her: "If push comes to shove, I've got the eyes, so I'm stronger." (25)
In Mulvey's film criticism, the gaze refers to how the audience and/or the camera looks at subjects of a film, and how the subjects within cinematic text look at each other.

L Likes to Watch

In the language of gaze theory, L's gaze is voyeuristic. In anime episode 16, he is shown watching Light as an exaggeratedly large presence, amplifying his role as the omniscient observer. In both the manga and the anime, L's extensive use of cameras and surveillance is a significant and memorable plot device. Surveillance plays a role after Chapter 58 too—especially with the third arc's multiple death note owners and emphasis on technology—but it is most compellingly associated with L. With his large eyes and staring, almost vacant expression, L is the story's inveterate voyeur. In theory and in real life, there is something desirous in the act of gazing: it is no mere glance or clinical look. It is no wonder that L's surveillance of Light is often the subject or premise for boylove and yaoi fan works (second only to the cuffs/chain subplot, of course).



L watches Light "study." (Chapter 17)

L's apparatus of power is the camera—in fact, a multiplicity of them. The anime makes salient this notion by showing the television screens reflected in his staring eyes (episode 14). L's investigation relies heavily (it might be argued, *too* heavily) on the use of cameras and surveillance, as in the following:

1. He looks at security tapes from the Tokyo Subway.
2. He watches Light through 64 cameras placed in his bedroom.
3. He watches Sakura TV and other stations, when necessary, when the second Kira appears.
4. He looks at tapes from Aoyama (implied).
5. He monitors Misa, Soichiro, and Light during the confinement period.
6. He watches Misa and Light after they are freed.
7. He watches Light, Naomi, and Shiori in the art gallery (movie only).



Light returns L's gaze. (Chapter 18, fittingly titled "Gaze" in the Viz translation.)

Despite the accepted supremacy of technology over mere human eyes, L's gaze is never good enough. Proof eludes him. For all the empirical evidence of tapes and pictures, he can't quite grasp the idea of otherworldly intervention. When his technologically mediated gaze can bring him no further to the truth, L makes himself known to Light. In other words, if the case is to proceed, he needs a reciprocal gaze. In Chapter 18, not only are the two geniuses in the same examination room, but they also share a mutual gaze for the first time.

When Misa repeatedly accuses L of being a "pervert" and makes veiled references to his sexuality, she is perhaps not far from the truth. L does not necessarily watch Light and others for sexual stimulation, but his level of scopophilia¹ is not *normal*. Thus, L's 'different' sexuality is signified in part by his so-called perverted habits.

¹ I use the term as film theory appropriates it, rather than its psychoanalytical meaning.

Light's Averted Gaze

Light's appearance in Chapter 1 is misleadingly, even exaggeratedly, fresh-faced and innocent. As he grows older, the shape, size, and expression of his eyes change drastically. Note the differences below, in images taken from chapters 1 and 89.



Light changes greatly from Chapter 1 (left) to Chapter 89 (right).

The change indicates more than maturity; it also signifies a relative loss of innocence and an unwillingness to gaze openly, unlike Misa or L. After the first several chapters, Light is frequently shown with narrowed eyes and glancing sidelong at others. A notable exception is in the amnesiac period. In the moment that he loses his death note memories, he stares wide-eyed in shock. Throughout the entire amnesiac period, Light's eyes are a little wider than normal; they look somewhat like they do in the earlier chapters. (The difference is even more pronounced in the anime.) Conventionally, people regard wide eyes and steady, open gazes as signs of honesty; Light tells L desperately while in confinement, "Zoom in or whatever and look into my eyes! Are these the eyes of someone who's lying? Let me out of here, Ryuzaki!" (35) Light does not know he is Kira, so he has nothing to hide.

On the other hand, Misa complicates things, because Light never looks at her when he is in boyfriend mode. (Note that he is only in boyfriend mode as Kira!Light; as amnesiac!Light, he gently resists Misa's affections.) A typical assessment is that he averts his gaze to hide his lack of emotional and sexual interest in her. His disinterest is even more pronounced when she is aggressively affectionate or cloying. In those cases, his gaze is often directed at something in which he is truly interested, e.g., his computer screen, or it is not directed at anything in particular. This trend begins from their first meeting. In the panel below, see how Misa's gaze is denied; we do not know what she is looking at, or even if her eyes are open. Ryuk and Rem are clearly looking at Light, whose own gaze is trained somewhere off-panel.



Light and Misa embrace, but don't lock eyes. (Chapter 29)

Kira!Light's averted gaze (as well as his *aversion*) reinforces a queer analysis. In Chapter 68, even Ryuk notes that Light is rather fixated on Misa's eyes; indeed, after she greets him while clad in lingerie and high heels, Light isn't interested in any part of her body other than her eyes. In other words, he doesn't want to be found *out*. In this context, Misa is somewhat of an unwitting fag hag. Amnesia!Light is also not interested in Misa, even though he has nothing to hide. Returning her affections/gaze is just not a priority. Furthermore, his inattention is often used for comedic effect, such as the scene in both the manga and the movie where he looks at his laptop screen instead of Misa.

Perhaps Light's most telling gaze is the one he gives L in Chapter 58. Light looks directly at L in the moments before the latter's death. Here, Light's gaze is triumphant and secret. In this instance, the angle is more important than the expression; he *looks down* at L, which is symbolic of his ultimate position in their power struggle. By the end of Chapter 58, Light has definitely come out on top.

Gazing and Desiring

One of the biggest complaints about Mulvey's theories is that she defines the gaze as an expression of desire that men direct at women. This is heterosexist and too rigid a view for many narratives. It certainly doesn't apply to *Death Note*, in which heterosexual romance and sexual relationships barely exist. In fact, I think there is but one way in which a male gaze in the manga is meaningfully directed at a woman, and that is how L looks at Misa.

Photos of fashion models are often critiqued in gaze theory because models are usually both subject and object of a gaze. (Anime!Misa's modelling gazes are briefly shown in episodes 12 and 13, first from the photographer's point-of-view, then as results of a internet image search.) Being a model/idol, Misa is used to the gazes of others, as well as being an object of desire. This is evident in her interactions with fans and how she deals with the Yotsuba group. Interestingly, by using her shinigami eyes, she can look back at the world.

Mulvey writes, "There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at." Misa distinguishes between different looks: there is the "perverted" look of "Mr. Stalker"² and Ryuzaki, and the looks of her fans, which she welcomes.

² She calls L "Mr. Stalker" when she is captured and blindfolded.



Three very different gazes. (Chapter 32)

The way that L watches Misa is two-fold. First, it is that of a detective at a suspect. Second, it is that of a fan/subject at the idol/object. L professes that he is a "huge fan" of Misa (Chapter 32). He is also familiar with women's magazines. He is, in fact, like many gay men who idolize and/or identify with glamorous female stars—think Madonna, Judy Garland, Kylie Minogue, et. al. Despite what LxMisa fans read into it, L is obviously insincere when he later tells her that he would fall for her.

Final Thoughts

Despite the subtextual suggestions of L and Light's ambiguities, I do not think that there is room for an LxLight pairing. Moreover, an analysis of possible pairings in *Death Note* should not adhere to stereotypical ideas of sexuality. Light acts no more attracted to L than to Misa—indeed, it could be said that he is similarly disinterested in both—Kira!Light's frustrations and amnesiac!Light's friendliness notwithstanding. L refers to Light as his "friend," and might be genuinely perturbed that he likes/admires someone who might be Kira, pre-echoing Matsuda and Ide's conversation in the last chapter. It is just as likely that L uses conventions of friendship to manipulate Light like he does Misa. Moreover, Light does not need friends, let alone romantic or sexual interests; any pairing would be one-sided and probably not something into which Light would invest his emotions.

Whether or not one is a proponent of UST³, one might notice the contradictions inherent in Light and L's relationship. Kira!Light doesn't touch L until the latter is dying; on the other hand, amnesiac!Light claps L on the back and grabs his shoulders while staring openly into his eyes. Kira!Light engages L in nothing more aggressive than a spirited tennis match; amnesiac!Light instigates a physical fight. Because of their fluid, fluctuating attitudes, I believe that L and Light do not fit a traditional conception of seme/uke. Even though Light is the pursued criminal, and L is the pursuing detective, they adopt both passive and aggressive roles throughout their battle of wits.

³ UST stands for unresolved sexual tension. In a fictional narrative, UST is a subtextual construct: characters interact in (often subtle) ways that suggest eroticism or sex without engaging physically in sexual behaviours.
