Humanity, Inhumanity, and Closeness in the Look

Tanella Boni

The newborn opens its eyes when it comes into the world. We close the eyes of the dead because they are no longer part of the world of the living. It is through looking that we enter the world, that we take possession of it, and that we leave it. We open or close our eyes to the living beings and things that surround us. Of prime importance among these living beings are other humans, who may resemble or be different from us, but whose eyes also look. From this perspective, to live is to look at other people and at ourselves. Artists, particularly those who work with light and looking, such as painters, photographers, or film-makers, show us that art is above all seeing life: we look at the other who has been painted, photographed, or filmed. At the same time a photograph or painting of this other tells us who we are and what type of relationship we have with the world. For looking is never neutral. Every look, from wherever it comes, is imbued with culture. In art, looking is part of writing. But, when we look at others, how do we see them? Do we see them? The blind may have poor sight, yet, because they have bodies, sensibilities, minds, and other faculties that enable them to enter into relations with others, they have a way of looking.

All looking is primarily an action of the eye, but it also involves our bodily position in relation to other bodies, other living beings, in relation to the things around us, in relation to the other.

At the same time this physical act has a spiritual significance: when our eyes look so do our minds. It is through looking that we make connections and create works of art. The other person is neither a machine, a computer, a thing, nor an animal. The other person is assumed to be a human being, with a body, a soul, and all the other faculties that together confer membership of the human race. This is why in our minds we *represent* others as either the same as or different from ourselves. In this way, from the look as an act performed by the eye, a sensory organ capable of seeing the other and oneself, we move to the look as it relates to the domain of representations, images, and the imagination.

For it is in the domain of representations and the imagination that everything happens; it is there that my look imagines others as it wants to see them, either in their place as human beings or relegated to the rank of a thing or an animal. It may also happen that the image we have of ourselves says nothing about what we are. We may live in the world of our dreams and desires, which have nothing to do with real life.

Today the importance of looking is revealed in moments of tragedy: violence and disasters of all kinds, both natural and man-made. For it is at such moments, when people are close to each other, that eyes meet and looks become personalised, appealing to memory. In this discussion we shall therefore analyse some aspects of what we call

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closeness in looking, seeing person-to-person. This way of looking quickly comes up against certain limits, boundaries and territories from which individuals cannot escape. It withdraws, establishing distance and difference, does not recognise others for what they are and may give some indications of its own position in the world: this is the look of difference. The look of difference is not the prerogative of others who come from far away, as we shall show. It may be that of someone very close, who does not recognise us as belonging to an all-inclusive human race. There is also another kind of look that never takes up a position because it is continually creating and recreating its own images. This way of seeing is that of the artist.

The look dies, the face disappears

Some literary texts are built entirely around looking: they are stories of ways of seeing that relate to memory, wars and violence past or present. This is true of Kossi Efoui's first novel *La Polka*.[1] The novel begins by looking at the stillness of a space in which houses are barely recognisable. Something terrible has happened, the reader does not know exactly what; the streets and other places suggestive of life and movement, of "celebration" and "feasting" have become sand, dust and gravel. "I am sitting down, looking out over the motionless street. My gaze stops there, on that pile of rubble: stretches of broken wall with doors and windows and their secret reinforcements laid bare by fire."[2] The seated character seems to be looking at a dying world. This world has no similarities with that of a still life. It appears initially as a dwelling place that has lost its soul. At first the eyes see no human beings, yet all the traces of human presence are there in the tools of cultivation. When looked at, these are completely still, as though they no longer existed in time. What is being shown here is a house, a human dwelling; yet the gaze records it in fragments: walls, doors, and windows, traces of a building whose primary role must once have been to shelter the private life of a human being. The destructive effects of fire heighten the sense of desolation, as though the character looking can imagine only ruins and the absence of life. Yet the bodies of human beings and animals do appear in this battlefield-like scene. These bodies are also still. They look with similar eyes. This is because, in this extraordinary situation, where life moves in slow motion or not at all, looking has been reduced to its function as the common denominator of all bodies. The narrator goes further: in situations where all traces of culture have become worthless and lost their meaning, at times when human beings lose all sense of where they are and cannot find their way or their home due to some extreme act of violence, human looking loses its particular quality. People no longer look with their own eyes. The look as common denominator expresses what remains of life in animals and humans who are fighting for survival; in moments of infinite distress the eyes of humans and animals are the same; they permit no distinction to be made; they reduce the different strata of life to the same level; they die, or almost. What difference is there between a human being and an animal at the point when the face becomes a mass that has lost all singularity? Humans and beasts alike are reduced to surfaces; we see this after earthquakes or floods, when exhausted people and animals can no longer be seen as anything but bodies clinging to life. As Kossi Efoui says: "The features have all been reshaped by something brutally suppressed in their eyes, rendering all the motionless surfaces identical. Humans and

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animals have the same faces, the same mask of astonishment."[3] Here the bodies have become changed to help them endure; they have fallen back into the state of formless matter, as though all soul and memory has left them.

When it is no longer possible to tell individuals apart or to distinguish between human beings and animals by the look in their eyes, then the body has lost its fundamental sensibility. Here the stillness of the bodies is that of stones or lifeless pieces of wood. The particular sensibility expressed in human eyes brings light and shadow to a human face. It is the inhuman gaze, dehumanised by extreme conditions, that renders the body unrecognisable. It is as though the human soul has lost its specificity. In such conditions the humanity of individuals is no longer bodily expressed through the look in their eyes. Other individuals, on looking at them, will see them as objects, animals, or matter. Individuality loses its meaning. For the first thing that my look says to the other is, "I am here, what do you want from me?" In losing its meaning, individuality takes with it the greater part of human dignity.

At the crossroads of humanitarian aid

The most widely-reproduced images, seen all over the world, show Africa, for example, with the dehumanised face of distress. We see skeletal women and children dying of hunger in Somalia, Sudan, or the countries of the Sahel, which are periodically stricken by drought. We also see sick women and children in the refugee camps of Congo, Guinea, or Sierra Leone. Most of the time the film crews catch glances from wide, protruding eyes, from which life is very slowly slipping away. We see destitution written on faces marked by physical and mental suffering. Sometimes the bodies are naked, or dressed in rags, as though to add to the display of extreme desolation. We also know that images shown to us in this way are generally framed to include a small amount of food provided by international aid organisations. The providers of this aid film the moribund state in which they find these bodies. The images show human beings reduced to the condition of animals, human beings who have lost all their bearings through war or some other kind of catastrophe. They reflect the degree to which those who come from far away – and preferably from the West – with humanitarian aid also bring with them a way of seeing others whose effect is not only to provoke the human emotion of pity, but also to popularise the view that human dignity no longer exists in certain regions of this so-called globalised world.

After all, since time began, wars and all kinds of other violence have disrupted entire societies and thrown human beings into a life of wandering and suffering. But when this happens now it is seen in the full light of day due to the information and images that expand people's view of the world, but may also disseminate distorsions of reality. The images circulate in places where they are most likely to be seen, notably by those who have the means to look at them: people who can read and write, who own televisions, for example, or who have access to the Internet. These people watch, film, photograph, and bring back images from the other world which, due to violence perpetrated by others or to natural disasters, is inhabited by people on the very margins of humanity. The West films and brings back images, which are then disseminated throughout the world. But do those who are looked at see themselves as others see them?

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The everyday images resulting from so-called humanitarian aid thus constitute a highly ambiguous way of seeing the other. Those who look take away all humanity from those they look at. When the eyes of a journalist or other special envoy meet those of people in distress, something terrible for both sides happens at the crossroads. It is there that, in spite of themselves, human beings classify each other: there are the active people, who bring aid because they see others dying or caught in a state of total want, and the others, the recipients of aid, who have lost their bearings, their sense of belonging to the land of their ancestors, and are living in fear. So humanitarian aid is part of the way of seeing of the globalised world, for which the West acts as security guard, watching over the grain that feeds the bodies and brings a little comfort. It is therefore no surprise that, from time to time, important people such as ministers, princesses, and diplomats descend on refugee camps. The widely-broadcast images can then continue to uphold the other's way of seeing those who are other to him, those who are losing their status as human beings.

Violence of the look

But let us go back into human history. This has already seen encounters, often of a violent nature, between those who now give aid and those who receive it. There have been periods during which the question of human dignity was overshadowed by ideas of work and the market. For human beings were bought and sold. The representation that accompanied these acts saw Africans not as full human beings but as merchandise, beasts of burden or "ebony wood".

Taken to extremes, the slaves we speak of were no more than sturdy bodies, capable of rebellion, as illustrated in Prosper Mérimée's short story *Tamango*, published in the *Revue de Paris* in 1829.

These creatures who were bought and sold had no faces; nor did they have land or families, since they had been pulled up like plants. A piece of wood cannot have either dignity or family. To understand this we need only think of the images of ships loaded with "ebony wood" in chains.

There was thus an inhuman way of seeing which chose not to recognise the humanity of the other. This involved looking at others without recognition, seeing them as strange, yet strong and able to work. They would then be put in a separate category of beings. Sometimes they would be looked at with condescension. We are thinking here of the idea of the "noble savage" current among eighteenth-century philosophers and in the travellers' tales from the days of colonisation. The story of a journey to Africa, Pierre Loti's *Le roman d'un Spahi*, was published in 1881. In the period from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, Europe discovered new worlds and new cultures that were very different from its own. It classified them as different and sometimes sought to study them.[4] After this came a time in which explorers went all over Africa,[5] followed by the period of colonisation, which launched a new cycle of ways of seeing marked by the need to "pacify" and bring Western civilisation to this different, and still "untamed" world.

For we know that the way we look at the distant other is not the way we look at those close to us. It is a look carried in the first instance by violence and the desire for conquest and expansion. During the period of human history that saw the traffic in Negro slaves, relations between black and white were made of violent looks, rape, and the possession

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of women's bodies. On the shores of Africa traces of this violence is still engraved in symbolic places that have taken hold of our memories: Ouidah in Benin, El Mina in Ghana, Gorée in Sénégal. The white way of seeing had all the positive attributes: it was the look of the master who owned houses and plantations, who could buy a slave to do the exhausting work required to grow sugar cane and other crops. The black way of seeing carried the burning desire to kill the master and take his place. At the same time the way that slaves saw themselves was informed by repressed images, for they had internalised not only whippings and other forms of corporal punishment, but also the terrible ocean crossing. The self-image of all such people, from black slaves to Indian coolies,[6] was primarily based on this idea of crossing, of being torn from their native lands and thrown on to the vast sea which was also a prison. The self-image of the colonised peoples was no more glowing. Even after the abolition of slavery and, much later, in the second half of the twentieth century, when most African countries were independent, the way people looked at themselves was inextricably bound up with their history of domination and oppression. We might ask ourselves whether the source of the problems associated with the lack of true democracty in these states, the wars and extreme poverly of African peoples, does not lie in the coloniser's way of seeing, which has ultimately turned the colonised into eternal recipients of aid. Economically speaking, Africa is still waiting for financial aid; it is getting into difficulties and has trouble escaping the spiral of debt. Politically speaking, can it do without the former coloniser's sensible advice and way of seeing? Sometimes a state's political future is shaped by the interests of the powers in the land; African heads of state are elected under the watchful eyes of those best placed to safeguard these interests. Ivory Coast currently provides an eloquent example of such a state of affairs. This country, long seen as a centre of political and economic stability in West Africa, has been in the eye of the storm for more than a year, and it is quite obvious that no important decisions concerning its future can be taken without the agreement of France and the European Union. The country continues to rely on aid from the former coloniser, which arrives like manna to save it from chaos.[7] In return, technical advisers keeps constant watch, growing more vigilant as days go by since, in a period of crisis, there is little trust between the former coloniser and donors on the one hand and the recipient nations on the other. The West keeps a watchful eye and asserts its right to have its say over the economic, poltical, and social management of the country.

The current issue of the right to interfere has today become crucial in the context of globalisation and the wide dissemination of information. It is also another side of the question of the way of seeing. The right to oversee the management of people and property seems to be a necessary condition for granting aid. Human rights, as shown by the various reports published since October 2000 on the crisis in Ivory Coast by NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, FIDH, and Reporters Sans Frontières, are overseen externally, even though some human rights movements do their best to gain an inside view of the atrocities being committed. Are they free to do so?

Seeing from close-to, seeing oneself

Art and philosophical movements have undoubtedly provided a space in which ways of seeing can meet in a less violent, but no less significant way. In colonial exhibitions at the

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French Museum of Mankind and the Museum of African and Oceanian Art at La Porte Dorée in Paris, African and other "exotic" cultures were put on show and looked at. However, in the first half of the twentieth century the educated elite in Africa raised the question of cultural values, complaining about the coloniser's way of seeing. If, in the mind of the coloniser, colonisation meant importing one's own culture and values along with one's language, those who learned that language also had their own way of looking at their cultures. At first there was borrowing on both sides. Black African sculpture made a big impression on painters such as Picasso and Derain. Among the Africans, a few traces of the other's way of seeing also appear in art, or more precisely in sculpture, in the form of "colonist" statuettes in West Africa. These sculptures represent the colonisers as they were seen in everyday life, dressed symbolically in trousers and hats. They are sold in the markets of cities frequented by tourists and collectors of "colonial images".

Images of black people also appear in advertising, as demonstrated by the exhibition entitled *Négripub, images des Noirs dans la publicité depuis un siècle* ("Negripub, images of Black people in advertising over the last century').[8] Here black people are seen as different beings who can sell a product, from toilet soap to chocolate and other everyday items. But black people also signify dance and music. They are cariacatured on posters and their lives were portrayed in the theatre from the late-nineteenth century onwards.[9] Black people are different because they can be bad or funny, moving seamlessly from one to the other. They have an innocent side. This idea was long accepted by the colonisers. It may still be current at a time when most African states seemed to have failed to establish policies that acknowledge the basic aspirations of their populations.

In the first half of the twentieth century the elite who had been educated in the language of the coloniser became aware of their own negative image as reflected in the words, books, and images of the other. The battle became centred on the rehabilitation of African values and cultures. One response to this was the concept of *négritude* theorised by Senghor and Césaire in the 1940s. Its aim was to assert a black self-image and to establish a way of looking at oneself. The African intellectuals and members of the black diaspora involved with the journal *Présence Africaine* in 1947 sought self-recognition through writing, publishing books, and speaking at conferences.[10] Today *négritude* seems to have gone out of fashion in Africa, superceded no doubt by other ways of affirming oneself as a human being. Yet it is still alive in the Americas, in Colombia for example, where the large black community in the west of the country is seeking to safeguard its values and to put forward a positive self-image in a country ruled by violence, where black people do not have the place they deserve. The question remains as to how much power and durability this way of seeing can have when it is expressed in the other's language. It is, however, only the visible, official face of an undercurrent in which the way people look at themselves relates more closely to daily life.

While African and Caribbean intellectuals may enter into a dialogue with British and French intellectuals like Théodore Monod, Jean-Paul Sartre, and a few others, other, perhaps less educated Africans, work in the shadow of the view of themselves that has become fixed by the art of photography. Recent years have seen the emergence of photographic treasures taken by African photographers of the colonial period, as revealed in the beautiful book on the work of Malick Sidibé. In his introduction,[11] André Magnin shows that Africa discovered photography in the late-nineteenth century. Since that time there have been several generations of photographers: "people came to be photographed

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as they would go to a celebration; it was a real event". So people liked looking at their own images which, far from being negative, were full of life, movement, and enthusiasm. The Africa of the first African photographers is not sad. It is not the Africa of the great disasters, nor the Africa that always loses. People would meet the eye of the camera with a radiant smile, a dance, strong feelings such as love or friendship. Sometimes children would bring their lively, joyful glances. Malick Sidibé in Mali and Augustt Azaglo[12] in Korhogo in the northern Ivory Coast had grown accustomed to capturing visions of life and all the emotions from which human substance is made, whatever a person's culture or education. These photographs provide a direct record of daily life. They reflect closeness in looking. Did these photographers and other artists of their ilk succeed in consolidating positive self-images for Africans? We may have our doubts since, after the 1960s, the history of Africa saw many bloody and tragic episodes. These became added to a collective memory that was already stamped with the ocean crossings, the slave trade, the pacification of the colonial days, forced labour, and all kinds of violence resulting from encounters with the other and being looked at by the other.

In literature, the ways of looking at oneself become ever more individualised. They are not informed by collectively-shared ideals. Writers refined their way of seeing in the 1980s and '90s; the new generations brought history into their narratives and fiction. While, in the 1970s, apartheid in South Africa was experienced and internalised as a real scandal, as reflected in the first poems by Paul Dakeyo,[13] today's writing seems to follow the contours of history as recreated by the pen, portraying a crazy world, full of contradictions, in which individuals must find their place. Sony Labou Tansi shows us an Africa of staggering complexity, with its defects, its stupidities, and the fundamental loneliness of its women and men. One might regard the writer's eye as having little importance in comparison to the misfortunes Africans experience. Yet the portrayal of the characters indicates that there is some room for hope. The way that children look at their own futureless lives, as in the work of Ahmadou Kourouma or Tierno Monénembo, tells us that all is not lost.[14] To lose one's bearings is neither shameful nor calamitous; it simply means inventing new values in order to survive. These child survivors are active people, wickedly inventive till their last breath. This is the image of an Africa that has shaken off all the myths created by both the other's and its own way of seeing. Today writers look with their own eyes, using the words necessary to express the unnameable, without exageration. An example of this is the project run by the Festival de Lille (Fest'Africa), which sent a dozen African writers to Rwanda four years after the genocide. They were free either to reflect or to turn a blind eye to what happened there. They each wrote in their own way and the result speaks volumes. While they were there they found human remains and skulls. They preferred to speak to the survivors, those for whom the dead made dreams, as Boubacar Boris Diop says, so that they would stand firm, that they would succeed and life would go on.[15] This suggests that the real dead in this story are those we call survivors. But how can survivors be given new life that can rise above the horror and madness they have seen in the eyes of the other they had taken for a friend, a relative? In Rwanda, a country that has become the symbol of African horrors, all individuals became scapegoats for the inhuman way of seeing of their very close neighbours, brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, friends and enemies, people who shared the same language and culture. When the way each looks at the other is coloured by fear and hatred of that other, it destroys hearts and debase souls.

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To look with hatred at those we know well and whose humanity we choose not to recognise brings about the worst of all deaths. In such conditions, is it still possible to save humanity with words and images alone? Only writing can assert that there are fragments of life to be found which will stop human beings definitively sinking to the level of animals or formlessness. Writing becomes a continual depiction of looking, as Kossi Efoui shows. For it is looking that enables individuals and humanity to meet with love. In *La Polka* the hero falls in love with a girl depicted on a postcard. From the day he first looks at her they are "always together",[16] even beyond death. Yet the character of Iléo Para, a hybrid man, capable of bearing witness to this miracle, describes himself as "invisible" in a photograph.[17] This would seem to be the paradox of African writers: they watch over fragments of life; they reveal unexpected ways of seeing; they maintain the spark in human faces, even in the worst tragedies; and yet, in their own eyes and those of others, they remain the embodiment of invisibility from every perspective. What can it mean to speak of a "way of seeing oneself" if not the acceptance of "oneself as other'? For the real life of writers, with its passions and emotions, is surely that of their characters, to whom they give something of their own faces and all the sharpness of their own eyes.

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Notes

1. Kossi Efoui, *La Polka*, Paris: Seuil, 1998.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
4. As did the geographer La Pérouse.
5. René Caillé was the first to discover Timbuktu in 1821; Stanley, Savorgnan de Brazza, and many others explored every corner of Africa.
6. The poet Khal Torabully clearly shows this in his poems *Cale d'étoile-Coolitude*, La Réunion: Azalées, 1992, and *Chair Corail, fragments coolies*, Guadeloupe: Ibis Rouge, 1999.
7. This is true of the five billion francs CFA given by France in April 2001, out of the thousand billion total that is needed to save the country. This was a breath of oxygen at a time when the political, economic, and social crisis was reaching the point of no return.
8. Catalogue published by Samogy, 1992. The exhibition comprised 310 posters, with notes and classified by theme. It was set up in 1985 and became a travelling exhibition in 1994, taken to Bénin, Burkina Faso, the Paris region, and Basse-Terre in Guadeloupe by Marie-Christine Peyrière and supported by UNESCO.
9. See among others the article by Sylvie Chalaye, in *Africultures* 3, December 1997, pp. 37–43. ["Du dangereux indigène au cannibale sympathique : les images du théâtre à l'époque coloniale,"]
10. *Présence Africaine* was both a journal and a publishing house. It became a crucial pivot for black people's way of seeing themselves and their own cultures. The Société Africaine de Culture was also set up around this publishing house. In Dakar and Paris in 1997, *Présence Africaine* set up a conference attended by many intellectuals, writers, artists, and academics with the aim of assessing its fifty-year history and opening up new perspectives.
11. André Magnin, *Malick Sidibé*, Zurich: Scalo, 1998, p. 21.
12. A photographer the author knew well as a child. He recently had an exhibition at FNAC, in Paris.
13. Here we should mention the last two collections in the series of so-called "militant" poems: *Soleils fusillés*, Paris: Droit et Liberté, 1977; *J'appartiens au grand jour*, Paris: Saint-Germain des Prés, 1979.

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14. Ahmadou Kourouma, *Allah n'est pas obligé*, Paris: Le Seuil, 2000. Winner of the Prix Renaudot and the Prix Goncourt des Lycéens 2000: the novel portrays a child soldier, who tells his story. Tierno Monénembo, *L'Aîné des orphelins*, Paris: Le Seuil, 2000: the author looks through the eyes of a teenager, condemned to death at the age of 15, in a prison for young people aged between 7 and 17, in Rwanda, during the genocide.
15. Boubacar Boris Diop, *Murambi, le livre des ossements*, Paris: Stock, 2000, p. 229.
16. Kossi Efoui, *La Polka*, op. cit. p. 36: "After that we were always together. My life stopped. But it is not death. It is silence. When you smile just as the flash goes. I felt as though I was in a photograph."
17. *Ibid.*, p. 92: "Iléo Para has never been able to recognise himself in any photograph, definitively rooting his anxiety in the idea that he remains in the paper and that his skin does not hold the light."

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