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Reading Seeing: Visuality in the Contemporary Novel

by
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in English and Comparative Literary Studies

University of Warwick
Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies
September 2017

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Christina Lupton for her invaluable help, guidance, and encouragement throughout my research. Many thanks also to Dr. Ross Forman for his insightful comments in the early stages of this project. And thank you too to Dr. Cristina Britzolakis for all of her help throughout. Finally, I would like to thank the Wolfson Foundation, for making this project possible.

Declaration

This thesis is submitted to the University of Warwick in support of my application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English and Comparative Literary Studies. It has been composed by myself and has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree.

Abstract

This study argues that contemporary literature archives and articulates its wider visual environment. It develops an interdisciplinary methodology, making a case for visuality as something that can be read. This study rethinks how we approach literary criticism: it asks that a reader bring awareness of a wider visual culture and an understanding of how images work to the text.

Close reading reveals how description, far from being ornamental to narrative, drives much of the thematic or theoretical content of a given novel. These texts do not simply replicate their wider image environment; they engage with it on a critical level. A visual approach can illuminate literary concerns and techniques. But, equally, the novel form has a lot to tell us about the structures and issues attendant on the image.

The first chapter considers how Teju Cole's prose emulates certain visual forms, particularly photography. For this author, writing and reading have an inherent affinity with visualization. And his work has much to tell us about the ethical and historical issues that attach to particular techniques and targets of visual representation.

The second chapter reads character description in Ali Smith's fiction from the perspective of visual portraiture. It shows how description stages conversations to do with gender and identity, and with the limitations of narrow categorization in both respects. Smith's novels then propose certain strategies as correctives to the dangers associated with a highly visual cultural environment.

The final chapter focuses on how Helen Oyeyemi's work exposes race's uneasy relationship with vision and visual representation. Like Cole and Smith, for Oyeyemi the novel is a valuable and flexible space within which to explore the possibilities and limitations of the visual field as an area for expression, for representation, and for the unfolding of identity.

But it is not only that this imaginary camera lens intervenes between the world and our look, structuring what we see in photographic terms, but also that we experience ourselves-as-spectacle in relation to it.

Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*.¹

In this thesis I look at the relation between visibility and contemporary fiction. Specifically, I examine the ways that the fiction of Ali Smith, Teju Cole, and Helen Oyeyemi argue for, and benefit from, a visually attuned theoretical approach. More widely, my point is a methodological and firmly interdisciplinary one: I want to make a case for visibility as something that can be read.

In *The Threshold of the Visible World*, Kaja Silverman writes of our ‘cultural image repertoire’ or ‘screen’ – the visual field that conditions how we come to see and interpret the world and ourselves. We ‘experience our specularity’ in accordance with the wider image conditions of our culture. For Silverman, writing in 1996, three particular media forms play a preeminent role in conditioning experience: still photography, cinema, and video.² My study proceeds from the premise that if image technologies so fully condition how we see, and experience ourselves as seen, then this stock of cultural images must surely filter down to impact on literary representation. Written images can be understood as product of, and indeed even part of, a contemporary image repertoire. This being the case, an appropriate critical approach – one that takes into account a novel’s emplacement within this wider visual scene – is called for.

This study demonstrates such an approach. It unearths the visual inclinations of Smith’s, Cole’s, and Oyeyemi’s fiction, revealing their work to be highly responsive to the contemporary image environment. My analysis suggests ways in which a reader might experience and react to a text’s visual attunement. And, most importantly, it shows how a critic might approach such a propensity: it suggests how best to figure the visual texture of a contemporary novel; how to illuminate its relation or contribution to a text’s thematic. Analogy or comparison figures as a

¹ Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.

² Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 195.

predominant mode of critique in this study: the fiction of the three authors is explored through the lenses of various visual media – namely photography, painting, and cinema – and by recourse to selected representational strategies, such as perspective or portraiture.

In this respect, my approach relies heavily on close reading: it concerns itself with the formal operations of the considered texts. Close reading as a practice proposes the benefits of paying ‘close attention to literary texture and what is embodied there’.³ And paying close attention is something that, as this study’s chapters will go on to outline, the considered texts themselves also advocate. ‘No, look properly’, says Amy in Smith’s *Like*, ‘Look really closely’.⁴ Attentiveness in the work of Smith, Cole, and Oyeyemi is seen to carry an ethical weight. Slow, careful application to the considered object is therefore both this study’s predominant mode, and an object of thematic interest for it.

My own focus on selected technical and aesthetic tropes contributes to a wider renewed critical interest in the practice. My methodology repurposes the New Criticism’s approach with the aim of parsing the relation between text and a specific media framework: twenty-first century visibility. As an interpretive strategy, it is especially sensitive to patterns of images, to descriptive techniques. It is visually minded in that it seeks out all those elements of the text that have some bearing on, or show some borrowing from, aspects of visual representation. While attention to the surface aesthetic of the work plays a significant part in this practice, it is more than just ‘surface reading’. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, in their introduction to a special issue of *Representations*, map the parameters of what they call ‘surface reading’.⁵ Approaches as diverse as book history, genre criticism, and New Formalism fall under its rubric. What they all have in common is an attentiveness to ‘what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but not thickness, and

³ Frank Lentricchia and Andrew DuBois, ‘Preface’, in *Close Reading: The Reader*, ed. by Frank Lentricchia and Andrew DuBois (London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. ix.

⁴ Ali Smith, *Like* (London: Virago, 2005), p. 46.

⁵ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, ‘Surface Reading: An Introduction’, *Representations*, 108.1 (2009), 1-21.

therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*'.⁶

The superficial appearance of a text – its descriptive use of shape or colour, its delineation of paintings or photographs – is this study's starting point, but not its end point. I read these surfaces as something that must be looked *at* in order for them to be seen *through*. In this sense, Smith's ekphrasis of a panel from a Renaissance altarpiece provides the reader with so much more than a straightforward experience of looking at a painting. Smith's description can be a window onto the way that we look now. It can tell us about habits of attention, it can tell us about what motivates the twenty-first century gaze and suggest the images that comprise its sphere of reference. Vision, understood as culturally formed and rooted, comes with a weight of theoretical consideration behind it. Textual representations of visuality, on this reading, cannot figure in a critical vacuum.

Best and Marcus cite Susan Sontag's 1966 essay 'Against Interpretation' as a forerunner to contemporary models of surface reading. My own study looks back to Sontag's essay, finding its approach to textual surface to be more productive than any of those offered by Best and Marcus. In lamenting the violence that interpretation can do to art, Sontag does not advocate doing away with critique all together. While 'an open aggressiveness' and 'an overt contempt of appearances' characterizes some readings, in particular Marxist or Freudian analysis, this need not be true of all interpretation. 'In some cultural contexts,' Sontag writes, 'interpretation is a liberating act. It is a means of revising, of transvaluing, of escaping the dead past'. Twentieth-century literary criticism, on the other hand, is all too often 'reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling'.⁷ Sontag proffers a part solution: 'What is needed, first, is more attention to form in art. If excessive stress on content provokes the arrogance of interpretation, more extended and more thorough descriptions of form would silence. What is needed is a vocabulary – a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, vocabulary – for forms'.⁸

⁶ Best and Marcus, 'Surface Reading', p. 9.

⁷ Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, by Susan Sontag (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 3-14 (pp. 6-7).

⁸ Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', p. 12.

The issue remains, however, that for literary criticism such a vocabulary is still underdeveloped. In an extended footnote, Sontag considers why this might be the case and what might be done about it:

One of the difficulties is that our idea of form is spatial (the Greek metaphors for form are all derived from notions of space). This is why we have a more ready vocabulary of forms for the spatial than for the temporal arts. The exception among the temporal arts, of course, is the drama; perhaps this is because the drama is a narrative (i.e., temporal) form that extends itself visually and pictorially, upon a stage.... What we don't have yet is a poetics of the novel, any clear notion of the forms of narration. Perhaps film criticism will be the occasion of a breakthrough here, since films are primarily a visual form, yet they are also a subdivision of literature.⁹

Sontag wrote this in a different, much earlier, critical environment. But her suggestion that an open borrowing from other interpretative fields can contribute towards the formation of a poetics of the novel remains valid. Theory that takes visual representation as its main object of interest evidences a visual vocabulary and sensitivity far in excess of any comparable approach in literary criticism. And so, following Sontag's direction, my interpretative strategy adopts terms and practices from a range of theoretical disciplines in order to account more fully for the workings of the considered texts' surfaces.

A scene – the pertinence of my chosen term will become clear – from Smith's *How to Be Both* offers up a preparatory illustration of this study's approach. The section is taken from near the end of George's narration. George – 'ready and waiting' – is sitting in the National Gallery.¹⁰ She is waiting for Lisa Goliard, with whom George's mother had an enigmatic (possibly romantic) relationship in the months leading up to her death:

George is ready and waiting.

⁹ Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', p. 12 (footnote).

¹⁰ Ali Smith, *How to Be Both* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2014), p. 368. There are two published versions of *How to Be Both*, one in which Francescho's narrative is first, the other in which George's narrative is first. References throughout are to the edition with Francescho's narrative first.

She plans to count the people and how long and how little time they spend looking or not looking at a random picture in a gallery.

What she doesn't know yet is that in roughly half an hour or so, while she's collating final figures (a hundred and fifty seven people will have passed through the room altogether and out of this number twenty five will have looked or glanced for no longer than a second; one woman will have stopped to look at the carving of the frame but not looked at the picture for longer than three seconds; two girls and a boy in their late teens will have stopped and made amused comments about St Vincent's knot of monk hair, the growth like a third eye at the front of his forehead, and stood there looking at him for thirteen full seconds), this will happen:

[Enter Lisa Goliard].¹¹

Smith's passage foregrounds the act of looking. George looks at others looking. She counts the number and length of their glances. The gallery setting licences and enhances this focus on vision. It brings to mind the museum photographs of Thomas Struth, images that capture gallery goers looking at canonical works of art as well as at each other (*Museum Photographs*). Indeed, a comparison of Smith's prose passage with Struth's photographic series enhances our understanding of how a piece of contemporary fiction can open itself up to a visually minded critical approach.

Both stage the act of looking at others looking. A viewer of Struth's photographs is presented with the turned backs of museum visitors; in Smith's prose, the role of looking on lookers is afforded to George and, concomitantly, the reader. Such a doubling effect locates these works as explicitly concerned with processes of visual engagement. It asks a viewer or reader to attend to questions of perception and representation – both their own engagement with such processes and that of the work considered.

So Smith's use of a gallery setting and her descriptive focus – the interest is with those who look, rather than the art object of their gazes – has a clear thematic investment in visuality. Further visually sensitive critique reveals Smith's passage to bear in addition a strong technical and compositional relation to visual representational forms, specifically cinema. Museum scenes are a common motif in film, many achieving iconic status: Alfred Hitchcock's detective protagonist in *Vertigo* watches his target staring at a painting in the Fine Arts Museum of San

¹¹ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 368-9.

Francisco;¹² truanting teenagers in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* pay a visit to the Art Institute of Chicago;¹³ both Woody Allen's *Play it Again, Sam* and *Manhattan* use art works as backdrop and pre-text for comically misjudged flirtatious conversation;¹⁴ *Bande à Part* – a French New Wave film directed by Jean Luc Godard, whose work George discovers in *How to Be Both* – sees the three main characters, Arthur, Odile and Franz dash through the Louvre in an attempt to break the world record for running through the gallery.¹⁵ The popularity and memorability of such episodes implies that film technique is in some way suited to, or put to best advantage by, the rich visual detail that a room of art provides.

As Steven Jacobs outlines in his essay 'Strange Exhibitions: Museums and Art Galleries in Film', the gallery setting holds more than just an aesthetic allure for film. While 'art museums and art galleries are attractive places for filmmakers', they also provide the grounds for sustained investigations into 'the theme of looking'.¹⁶ Jacobs lists films in which, 'as in Thomas Struth's famous pictures of interiors of famous museums, through colours, costume, and gestures, a complex dramaturgy is established that unites the museum visitors with depicted figures'.¹⁷ For directors such as Hitchcock, Rossellini, and Godard, museum scenes provide a 'context for analyzing the cinematic gaze', enabling reflections 'on the nature of images and the medium of cinema'.¹⁸ A similar consensus can be reached in relation to Smith: her works' gallery scenes are cinematic in their desire to foreground the image and the look at the level of concept, as well as in their more straightforward desire to incorporate visuality into their descriptive outlook.

Throughout the pages from which the episode in question is taken, Smith's text continues to evidence an affinity with aspects of cinematic composition. As with those directors that Jacobs mentions, Smith is apparently sensitive to the thematic and aesthetic potential of a gallery setting and her description draws on a variety of

¹² *Vertigo*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock (Paramount Pictures, 1958).

¹³ *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, dir. by John Hughes (Paramount Pictures, 1986).

¹⁴ *Play it Again, Sam*, dir. by Woody Allen (Paramount Pictures, 1972); *Manhattan*, dir. by Woody Allen (United Artists, 1979).

¹⁵ *Bande à Part*, dir. by Jean Luc Godard (Columbia Pictures, 1964).

¹⁶ Steven Jacobs, 'Strange Exhibitions: Museums and Art Galleries in Film', in *Strange Spaces: Explorations into Mediated Obscurity*, ed. by André Jansson and Amanda Lagerkvist (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 297-316 (p. 297, p. 300).

¹⁷ Jacobs, 'Strange Exhibitions', p. 310.

¹⁸ Jacobs, 'Strange Exhibitions', p. 300.

cinematic techniques to maximize this effect. Her prose juxtaposes descriptive long shots and close-ups that are apparently typical to filmic representations of art galleries. The narrative pans out from the waiting George and takes in the browsing crowd before giving the reader a close focus of minute details in George's chosen painting: Francesco del Cossa's *Saint Vincent Ferrer*. The author's position of visual privilege, able to direct her reader towards otherwise unnoticed features, is akin to that of the film camera.

In *Bande à Part*, Godard's camera pauses to linger over Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* in the Louvre scene, providing a hiatus in this entertaining gallery sprint. In *Vertigo*, the camera picks out the details of a bunch of flowers and blonde chignon in Carlotta Valdez's portrait, pointing up the unsettling resemblance between the painting's viewer and her depicted ancestor. Similarly in the above extract from *How to Be Both*, Smith interrupts her swift, loosely punctuated list with a close observation of the Dominican friar's distinctive haircut, his protruding forehead. Prose mimics film at a lexical, as well as at a structural level. A repetition of 'track' to describe character action calls to mind the camera movement that these actions apparently replicate: 'She will track the woman'; 'Is she tracking George? (Unlikely. Anyway, now George is tracking her)'. The direction '[Enter Lisa Goliard]' reads like play or film script, a possible allusion to the conventions of the medium that Smith's description apes.¹⁹

As George follows Lisa Goliard from the gallery, Smith's narrative conjures the various tropes and techniques of the mystery film; as Steven Jacobs notes in his study of the setting's popularity for cinema, museums often feature on film as 'places of mystery'.²⁰ A common visual motif of the genre is for the camera to render the point of the view of the detective, who all the while remains unseen by his or her target. Similarly, Smith's chosen perspective provides her reader with a simulated subjective camera viewpoint. As with the passage quoted earlier, a focus on vision comes to form a leitmotif in the section, emphasizing the authority of George's eye in the description of events: 'and George will feel her own eyes open wider at this one'; 'In honour of her mother's eye she will use her own'.²¹

¹⁹ Smith, *How to Be Both*, pp. 369-371.

²⁰ Jacobs, 'Strange Exhibitions', p. 302.

²¹ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 371.

The author's characteristic free indirect discourse, which slips between a first and third person perspective, allows an easy movement from subjective to objective viewpoint, respectively. This kind of narrative movement has much in common with the filmic shot-reverse-shot. In this, the camera switches to take in the watching protagonist, emphasizing who is doing the watching, before resuming the mediation of his or her eye-view:

She'll stand right in front of it for several minutes, far longer than anyone except George herself.
Then she'll shoulder her designer bag and she'll leave the room.
George will follow.
Standing close to the woman's back, so long as there are enough people to camouflage her (and there will be).²²

The effect is typical to the mystery film genre and Smith's prose's remediation of the technique achieves similar results. The technique's associated tracking and moments of visual ambiguity prompt a reader/watcher engagement and an identification with the protagonist that are both largely visually based: the description that follows continues to focus on this 'woman's back', effectively textually re-presenting George's eye-view for the reader.

These moments of visual suspense that rely on the obscured, or back-of-head shot form a visual motif across *How to Be Both*. In Francescho's version of the above event, for instance, we see a multiplication of this unseen seeing, in which narrative proceeds for the reader by means of unclear visual details: 'We followed the beautiful woman until she came to the door of the house and went through it and shut it and left the boy, still unseen outside'. Francescho's first impression of George ('This boy I am for some reason sent to shadow' – and indeed the reader's if he or she is reading Francescho's narrative first – relies on a wholly visual system of representation: George's mood and motive must be gleaned by means of attention to a series of seen clues.²³

Attending to written representation through the lens of another medium – film, in this instance – reveals itself to be a useful expository exercise. Analysing *How to Be Both* with film in mind clarifies exactly how the novel's stylistic, structural, and lexical organization ably underline its wider thematic concern with

²² Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 369.

²³ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 41

the visual: this is a book about painters, perception, and the ethics of viewing. The work's openness to being considered within a film rubric points towards an intermedial film-text relationship which functions successfully at the level of practice. Smith's prose is part of, and reduplicates, elements of the 'screen': it alludes to the look of cinema, an aesthetic taken from a wider cultural image repertoire. In this way, contemporary literature can be reckoned to invite a visual approach. And this invitation offers a platform for rethinking how we approach literary criticism: it asks that a reader bring awareness of a wider visual culture and an understanding of how images work to the text.

In an appearance-obsessed and image-saturated culture I think that a case can be made for the benefits of approaching any given contemporary text with a critical awareness of seeing. Through a consideration of passages such as the above, I show how markedly intertwined the verbal and visual domains of representation and experience are for the contemporary literary text, and suggest that an adequate critical approach necessarily follow suit. However, for the purposes of this study I take works that explicitly demand such an approach from the outset. My analyses of the work of Smith, Cole, and Oyeyemi are to be understood as case studies in respect of this. While these particular authors' texts offer themselves up for such a reading – on account of authorial interest in visual art or experience, or a literary foregrounding of a visual thematic or aesthetic – I contend that a similar culturally inflected visuality must surely filter down into any literary product of the contemporary age.

The fictional output and/or extra-literary interests of the three authors under consideration show clear interest and involvement in the visual arts. The visual inhabits Smith's texts on various levels. In terms of motif, pictures pepper her narratives in many forms: there is John Duncan's painting of Saint Bride;²⁴ in *How to Be Both*, photographs feature again and again as pockets of history; the life and paintings of Pauline Boty are interlaced throughout *Autumn*'s narrative.²⁵ 'The Shortlist Season' in *The Whole Story and Other Stories* is set in an art gallery:

²⁴ Smith, *Like*, p. 280.

²⁵ Ali Smith, *Autumn* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016).

watching and looking make up a predominant part of the narrative.²⁶ Visual art also colours Smith's fiction in terms of more dominant, overriding themes: *The Accidental* draws its central plots devices from Pasolini's *Teorema*; a resurrected Italian Renaissance fresco painter narrates half of *How to Be Both*.²⁷ Smith's 2013 short story collection, *Shire*, contains sketches and photographs by her partner, the artist filmmaker and curator Sarah Wood.²⁸

Cole's work is also in dialogue with a wider cultural image stock. The author's own photographs of Lagos intersperse the chapters of his novella *Every Day Is for the Thief*.²⁹ As in Smith's work, gallery settings feature in Cole's fiction: *Every Day Is for the Thief* dedicates a chapter to a visit of the Nigerian National Museum; in *Open City*, Julius visits the American Folk Art Museum and the International Center of Photography in New York.³⁰ Readers of the latter are quick to draw parallels between Cole's prose and visual artistic expression. In a review for the *Observer*, Petina Gappah proposes that 'as Cole is an art connoisseur, it is apposite to compare his book with the old masters that he has studied'. She suggests that 'like a Vermeer, a De Hooch or a Bruegel, which can be viewed many times and never fail to delight, *Open City* is a book that can be read again and again, with each reading bringing the reward of further insights'.³¹

As Gappah notes, Cole's interest in the visual arts extends beyond his work as a novelist. He is a historian of Early Netherlandish art, a theorist of photography, and a practiced photographer. Cole has held several exhibitions of his photographs, the most recent of which – 'Punto d'Ombra' or 'Blind Spot', which was held in Milan in 2016 – has been published as a book.³² Cole writes a monthly column, 'On Photography', for the *New York Times Magazine*. The column ranges from considerations of Henri Cartier-Bresson's concept of the 'decisive moment', to the iconic images of the Black Lives Matter movement.

²⁶ Ali Smith, *The Whole Story and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 2004).

²⁷ *Teorema*, dir. by Pier Paolo Pasolini (Euro International Film, 1968).

²⁸ Ali Smith, *The Accidental* (London: Penguin, 2006); Ali Smith, with images by Sarah Wood, *Shire* (Woodbridge: Full Circle Editions, 2013).

²⁹ Teju Cole, *Every Day Is for the Thief* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014).

³⁰ Teju Cole, *Open City* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012).

³¹ Petina Gappah, review of Teju Cole, *Open City* (2011), *The Observer*, 7 August 2011 < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/07/open-city-teju-cole-review> > [accessed 13 June 2017].

³² Teju, *Blind Spot* (Random House: New York, 2017).

In outlining the extra-literary interests of the authors under consideration, I do not suggest that this study will proceed along thematic lines, matching writers' interests to artistic allusions within their texts. While such allusions are frequent across Smith's and Cole's oeuvres – as noted, both authors refer frequently and casually to images within the Western art canon and contemporary media culture – Oyeyemi's fiction's suitability for visual study is less immediately obvious. Art objects and gallery settings feature less frequently than in the work of either Smith or Cole. There are no extensive ekphrases of Renaissance paintings, film does not figure as a dominant stylistic influence.

But this is not to suggest that Oyeyemi's fiction is unconcerned with looking and its implications: in spite of a perceived lack of visual art objects at the level of surface allusion, Oyeyemi's novels and short stories have a strong conceptual interest in visuality. Her fiction considers the theory, psychology, and ethics of visuality. An array of visual symbols inhabits her novels and short stories: there are mirrors and reflections, hallucinations, uncanny doppelgangers, and puppets. Racialized or gendered modes of perception and representation are significant concerns. *Boy, Snow, Bird*, for instance, explores the nature of the feminine gaze, while *Mr Fox* stages the masculine one.³³

The former novel establishes vision as a problematic in its early pages. Boy, one of the work's protagonist-narrators, alludes to *Hamlet*: 'You don't return people's smiles – it's perfectly clear to you that people can smile and still be villains'.³⁴ The attitude expressed is common to different periods and forms of artistic representation. It points towards a disjunction between appearance and sentiment: *looking* friendly is not the same as actually being so.

And a statement of similar anti-empiricism occurs a couple of pages later:

I saw the rat catcher in the ticket line, long and tall and adamant, four people away from the front, and I pulled my coat collar over my head. I saw the rat catcher get out of a cab and stride toward me, veins bulging out of his forehead, looking like he meant nothing but Business. I whirled around and saw the rat catcher again, pounding on the bus window, trying to find me among the passengers. Okay, so he wasn't really there at all, but that was no reason to relax – it'd be just like him to turn up, really turn up, I mean, a

³³ Helen Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* (London: Picador, 2014); Helen Oyeyemi, *Mr Fox* (London: Picador, 2012).

³⁴ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 6.

moment or two after my guard came down. I saw him at least twenty times, coming at me from all angles, before I reached the counter.³⁵

Oyeyemi's description goes to some length to create a strong visual realization of the rat catcher; he is 'long and tall and adamant' and his veins are specified as 'bulging out of his forehead'. A repeated 'saw', along with a further instance of 'looking', reiterates how the rat catcher's emotions, intentions, and very presence are all registered visually. But then the strikingly casual admission of 'Okay, so he wasn't really there at all' abruptly undercuts this impression, calling doubt on the trustworthiness of Boy's repeated preceding claims of 'I saw'. The result is that any subsequent use of the verb in this episode – 'I saw him at least twenty times', Boy continues to assert – must be approached with caution. The passage delights in the literary imagination's ability to surpass literal sight by rendering the invisible visible. It is clear from such an exposition that sight and the visual image are of significant interest for Oyeyemi.

While this thesis' three sections can be taken as stand-alone case studies, when considered comparatively certain unifying themes emerge across and within the texts of these three authors. Identity – along with visual or verbal representation's (in)ability to render identity – is one such theme. Visuality emerges as tangent to our understandings of selves and others and, for all three writers, the exact nature of this relation is something to be figured out. Within this rubric, gender and race figure as significant categories for consideration. Cole's *Open City* consistently plays with racialized categories of light and dark, visible and invisible: 'In the Harlem night, there are no whites'.³⁶ Smith's fiction blurs and undermines any distinction between a male and female 'look'. And Oyeyemi's fiction touches on both of these issues: textual representation is, for this writer, an able medium for the expression of gender and racial fluidity.

First and foremost, however, this study's concern is with the visual image. Gender and race feature *because* they are visual concerns and, accordingly, because their operation within a literary text necessitates a visually minded approach. In

³⁵ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 10.

³⁶ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 18.

Smith's and Oyeyemi's fiction, gender is predominantly something that is outwardly manifest and manipulable – it has to do with appearance, costume, performance. Similarly, visibility is the framework within which understandings of race are formed:

Race is a particular, historically and culturally located form of human categorization involving visual determinants marked on the body through the interplay of perceptual practices and bodily appearance. Race has not had one meaning or a single essential criterion, but its meanings have always been mediated through visual appearance, however complicated.³⁷

Linda Martín Alcoff outlines how the single characteristic that marks out this varied and changing classificatory system is its operation through and dependence upon visual attributes. In line with this, this study reads race in Cole's and Oyeyemi's fiction as an emphatically visual construction: it predominantly plays out through – and is problematized by – visual description.

My interest in visibility stems predominantly from the topic's contemporaneity. The image is often denoted as our dominant cultural paradigm. And in line with this, a concern with the visual – understood in all its material and virtual manifestations to encompass traditional art images, moving pictures, the hyperreality of the internet – has emerged as one particular unifying trend across and within late twentieth-century and contemporary critical fields. The historical character of contemporary culture's obsession with the visual is often plotted along the following lines: modernity's continual development of new optical instruments and techniques – such as the camera obscura, linear perspective, the phenakitiscopes, photography, and film – has encouraged a dominance of the visual in Western culture, producing individuals who are increasingly constituted by and in their visual environments.³⁸

Thus far, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries supposedly represent the apogee of the image's cultural influence. What differentiates the contemporary's

³⁷ Linda Martín Alcoff, 'Philosophy and Racial Identity', in *Philosophies of Race and Ethnicity*, ed. by Peter Osborne and Stella Sandford (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 13-28 (pp. 17-18).

³⁸ See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

relation to the image from historical precedents is the extent of its technological advance. New imaging technologies now permit an unprecedentedly rapid production and dissemination of diverse visuals: the notion of ‘a culture totally dominated by images’, as W. J. T. Mitchell writes, ‘is now a real technical possibility’.³⁹ Correlatively, this technology-driven acceleration of visual culture effectively multiplies all previous concerns with the image: a need to understand the image’s workings presses ever more urgently.

The texts in my study are very much in dialogue with this situation. Cole has written of the ‘fear’ inspired by Google’s ‘panoptic eye’, an anxiety detectable in his fiction’s considerations of what forms and meanings attach to vision in the twenty-first century.⁴⁰ Smith’s fiction similarly tackles contemporary image issues: her work considers looking’s capacity to be voyeuristic, violent or objectifying. A dinner party scene in *There but for the* instances one of the many occasions in Smith’s work in which such concerns play out in greater detail. The passage develops as a set piece on issues relating to the image in a digital age. On discussing the ‘visceral’ and ‘aesthetic’ shock produced by a painting, Terence claims that his child ‘sees worse things every day on TV’:

She just needs to type a couple of words into a computer to see things every bit as bad, and worse, to see them as if she’s not really seeing them. Seeing a picture like one of Palmer’s is very different from seeing something atrocious on a screen. There *is* no screen. That’s the point. There’s nothing between you and it.⁴¹

Terence’s emphatic use of the verb ‘to see’ – repeated, mantra-like, six times in three sentences – gestures towards the importance of the act in navigating a busy media environment. The sentiment is apposite to a twenty-first century media condition that is often saturated with violent media. It stresses that the act of seeing is far from straightforward. Terence denotes the ‘not really seeing’ as one of the most dangerous facets of viewing internet-hosted pictures.⁴² Seeing, Terence stresses, comes in a variety of forms; simply looking at something is not always analogous to seeing it

³⁹ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 15.

⁴⁰ ‘Google’s Macchia’, in *Known and Strange Things: Essays*, by Teju Cole (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), pp. 181-189.

⁴¹ Ali Smith, *There but for the* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012) pp. 166-167.

⁴² Ali Smith, *There but for the*, p. 167.

really. And, similarly, an image's particular physical support – in this instance paint and canvas versus screen – impacts upon the viewing experience.

Uncertainty as to whether an image's carrier medium might reveal or conceal is clearly a point of interest for Smith. In relation to *The Accidental*, the author explains her fascination with 'the interface notion': it is 'interesting because all of those characters have something between them and the world and questioning if that's a good thing or whether you should see, whether you actually see anything. When we look at a TV screen, do we actually see more?'.⁴³ This final provocation, along with explicitly discursive passages such as the above from *There but for the*, imply a desire to prompt a reader's awareness as to the potential difficulties of negotiating the image, particularly as it figures in the contemporary media situation.

Of course, visual immersion is not an exclusively (post)modern condition. Silverman, in her assessment of our contemporary 'screen', suggests that 'ever since the inception of cave drawing, it has been via images that we see and are seen': 'there can never have been a moment when specularly was not at least in part constitutive of human subjectivity'.⁴⁴ And, accordingly, overlapping and recurring discourses and/or phenomena – Mitchell cites 'idolatry, iconoclasm, iconophilia, and fetishism' as examples – effectively resist periodization.⁴⁵ As Matthias Bruhn and Vera Dunkel note, our current 'renaissance' in image studies 'would hardly be thinkable without an educative and intellectual tradition that understands images as carriers and shapers of ideas and emotions'.⁴⁶

And in this vein, this study's wider methodological conjecture – that visually minded critique can ably illuminate textual representation – need not be confined to the contemporary. What must be period specific, however, is the exact nature of the critical approach: while literary texts might have always responded to a wider image culture, the content and organization of such a culture changes from period to period. Silverman summarizes this sentiment in relation to the twentieth century:

⁴³ Ali Smith, interviewed by Caroline Smith, 'Ali Smith Interviewed by Caroline Smith', *Brand Literary Magazine*, 1 (2007), p.78.

⁴⁴ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 195.

⁴⁵ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 15.

⁴⁶ Matthias Bruhn and Vera Dunkel, 'The Image as Cultural Technology', in *Visual Literacy*, ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 165-178 (p. 176).

what is specific to our epoch is not the specular foundation of subjectivity and the world, but rather the terms of that foundation – the logic of images through which we figure objects and are in turn figured, and the value conferred upon those images through the larger organization of the visual field.⁴⁷

Following Silverman, this study takes a determinedly culturalist approach to its consideration of visibility: it approaches the subject with the understanding that the way we look at anything has a deeply historical character. Silverman is not alone in her adoption of such an angle. Martin Jay, for instance, takes episteme to mean scopic regime: his ‘Scopic Regimes of Modernity’ divides up history in terms of a period’s dominant visual culture and attendant subcultures of looking. Along similar lines, Jonathan Crary locates the formation of modern subjectivity – specifically, the modern subject’s habits of attention and perception – within developments that took place in visual culture and technology at the end of the nineteenth century.⁴⁸

Marx W. Wartofsky’s mode of ‘historical epistemology’ – ‘No mentation without representation!’ and ‘No internal representation without external representation!’ – pushes a culturalist approach to vision to its extreme.⁴⁹ ‘What we know, or visually cognize’, Wartofsky argues, ‘is in significant measure a function of how we represent the visual world pictorially’ and ‘the modes of our visual cognition change with changes in the modes of our pictorial representation’.⁵⁰ The mind, on this reading, is essentially a cultural artefact that registers and replays the wider representational customs that surround it. Both external visual space and the space of the mind become pictorialized on account of wider artistic conventions: we see and think in pictures.

This study takes contemporary novels as cultural artefacts as such, reading them as records of wider representational practices and the concerns that surround these practices. Unlike Wartofsky’s unproblematic link between mind and representation, the relation that I map out between novel and the wider visual scene is a knowing and a critical one. The texts that I look at are aware of their

⁴⁷ Silverman, *Threshold*, p.195.

⁴⁸ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (London: MIT Press, 1999).

⁴⁹ Marx W. Wartofsky, ‘The Paradox of Painting: Pictorial Representation and the Dimensionality of Visual Space’, *Social Research*, 50.4 (1984), 863-883 (pp. 863-864).

⁵⁰ Wartofsky, ‘The Paradox of Painting’, p. 864.

emplacement within a wider visual field. And while this awareness sometimes registers as a straightforward emulation, often it is accompanied by critique.

For instance, there are moments across the work of all three considered authors in which vision falls short of producing the desired result, be it a veridical representation or an intersubjective relation. Such moments query the ethical implications of privileging the visual as a modality for expression and understanding. Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* delights in prose description's ability to produce visual effects, to linger over surfaces. But it also capitalizes on textual representation's privileged position – its capacity to be visual in figurative, but not literal terms – to caricature the value attached to these surfaces.

Glenn Ligon's 1998 work *Self Portrait Exaggerating My Black Features/Self Portrait Exaggerating My White Features* exhibits two identical photographs of the artist side-by-side. Each picture has a different caption, one drawing attention to Ligon's 'black features', the other to his 'white'. Alessandra Raengo introduces her study of race with this image, given its ability to expose 'the expectation that the black body would work as one sign, one perfect image'.⁵¹ Raengo explains how it achieves this effect: 'We see the same body in both panels but the captions demand that we read the same features alternatively *as* black and *as* white, thus positing the black body as a sort of duck-rabbit figure – an optical illusion. In repeating, but with a difference, these two panels open a chasm in the visual field that makes apparent that seeing is always seeing *as*'.⁵²

Oyeyemi's prose does something similar. Through an emphasis on artifice and indeterminability, it exposes the racialized body as an optical illusion. Oyeyemi's description outlines characters that, like Ligon's images, flicker between the categorizations of black and white. *Boy, Snow, Bird* is concerned with the phenomenon of racial passing, whereby members of one racial group are accepted, or go unnoticed, in another racial group. Members of the Whitman family 'pass' as white. Their carefully stage-managed claim to whiteness acts like the captions to Ligon's images, determining how the body is to be read. The ultimate designation is a question of context, of presentation, and of perception. Those who trust in any

⁵¹ Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as a Face Value* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), p. 3.

⁵² Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual*, p. 1.

agreement between racial identity and outward presentation fail to realise the optic as illusory:

Snow's beauty is all the more precious to Olivia and Agnes because it's a trick. When whites look at her, they don't get whatever fleeting, ugly impressions so many of us get when we see a colored girl – we don't see a colored girl standing there. The joke's on us.⁵³

So the texts in question do not simply replicate their wider image environment. Rather they engage with it on a critical level. They don't just tell us *what* the components of our visual culture look like: they try to map out *how* these images and visual structures work. The scope of this claim differentiates this project from other comparable studies. Very many works of literary criticism tackle the visual-verbal interaction. Mieke Bal's *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually* and Franco Ricci's *Painting with Words, Writing with Pictures: Word and Image in the Work of Italo Calvino* are two such texts that have influenced my own approach.⁵⁴ But this study does not consider a given text or author's relation to specific visual media forms and concerns. Instead, it reads aspects of Smith's, Cole's, and Oyeyemi's work as responses to visual culture more generally. The suggestion is that the novel can operate as an avenue – even a medium – for reflection upon the wider relationship that we have with the visual. And, further to this, we might understand the contemporary novel as not simply *reflective* of visual culture, but as an active *part* of it.

In line with this, this project falls within the wider framework of visual studies, or the study of visual culture.⁵⁵ This class of criticism arose in the 1990s in response to

⁵³ Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual*, p. 139.

⁵⁴ Mieke Bal, *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Franco Ricci, *Painting With Words, Writing With Pictures: Word and Image in the Work of Italo Calvino* (Toronto: University of Toronto UP, 2001).

⁵⁵ In 'Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture', W. J. T. Mitchell clarifies these terms, and the relationship between them. 'I think it's useful at the outset', Mitchell writes, 'to distinguish between visual studies and visual culture as, respectively, the field of study and the object or target of study. Visual studies is the study of visual culture'; 'Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 1.2 (2002), 165-181, (p. 166).

an awareness of the image's increasing dominance in contemporary culture. A consideration of the relation between word and image is a significant subsection of the field. In his 1994 *Picture Theory*, Mitchell identifies the 'pictorial turn' as a dominant emergent trend in cultural criticism, and Gottfried Boehm similarly outlines his concept of the 'iconic turn' in the same year.⁵⁶ Both terms share a sense of overthrowing the 'linguistic turn' of the previous decades, and both assess the image's crucial role in creating meaning. Mitchell's and Boehm's work calls for a way of theorising that gives credence to the ubiquity and sway of the image and for a way of thinking that is structured visually. This latter proposal bears the influence of ideas of pictorial form in Wittgenstein's early work, by which imaginative thought and linguistic constructions aim to produce a logical, mental map of reality. But the respective 'turns' of Mitchell and Boehm go further, hoping to expand and unpick any assumed covalence between linguistic and verbal picturing.

The intention is therefore not simply to substantiate semiotic approaches to art history, of the kind practiced by Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson. As, although fruitful, this methodology still displays too heavy an emphasis on the linguistic component. For Mitchell, the 'pictorial turn' is 'postlinguistic, postsemiotic'. While Mitchell acknowledges the persistent imbrication of word and image, for proponents of the pictorial turn, he explains, analysis is generally oriented towards the latter.⁵⁷

Accordingly, as the field of visual culture studies develops post-identification of the pictorial turn, it demonstrates an increasing tendency to regard image over – and as separate from – language. Barbara Maria Stafford's *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images*, for instance, aims at dislodging 'a distorted hierarchy' that ranks 'the importance of reading above that of seeing'. It argues instead that 'images, ranging from high art to popular illusions, remains the richest, most fascinating modality for configuring and conveying ideas'.⁵⁸ Along similar lines, James Elkins advocates for an increased 'visual literacy', seeing this capability as a requisite for dealing with an image-saturated culture. Choice of the word 'literacy', it should be

⁵⁶ *Was ist ein Bild*, ed. by Gottfried Boehm (Munich: Fink, 1994). For a discussion of the difference between the two terms see, Gottfried Boehm and W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Pictorial Versus Iconic Turn: Two Letters', *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 50.2-3 (2009), 103-121.

⁵⁷ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 16.

⁵⁸ Barbara Maria Stafford, *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 4.

noted, does not mean that the proposed approach is language-based. Rather, as Elkins rationalizes, the term is merely appropriate in its acknowledge that ‘tropes of reading are unavoidable in talk about images’.⁵⁹

Indeed, calls for visual literacy explicitly aim to question a perceived logocentric bias in theory and education. As Elkins explains: ‘Given the enormous literature on the visual nature of our world – I need only name Mitchell, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Martin Jay, Jean Baudrillard, and Lisa Cartwright to conjure the field – it is amazing that college-level curricula throughout the world continue to be mainly text-based, with intermittent excursions into visual art and culture’.⁶⁰ Stafford, Elkins, and other writers – Lisa Cartwright and Marita Sturken in *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, for instance – collectively call the use of text-based study into question.⁶¹ Culturally, linguistic expression appears to be ceding dominance to visual communication and, according to Elkins et al., modes of thought and study ought to follow accordingly.

The place for literature and its study within this framework is, as yet, unclear. Reading a literary text in a mode that prefers word to image is surely a precondition. While certain writing may be identified as particularly visual or imagistic, this so-called visuality is necessarily limited by language’s capacities. Figurative language – composed of simile, metaphor, symbolism, lexical and structural choices etc. – is a construct that approaches the literal image in an approximate way.

Ekphrasis is a case in point. The device is most often construed as simply able to function as inset ornament within the text and to interact with the fiction at only the narratological level of theme or characterization, rather than faithfully exhibit the mechanics and outcome of visual representation. Wendy Steiner describes the trope’s impact as ‘lacking in spatial extension and in the coincidence of aesthetic experience with artefact characteristic of painting’. This ‘literary topos of the still moment’ is therefore ‘an admission of failure, or of mere figurative success’.⁶²

⁵⁹ James Elkins, ‘Introduction: The Concept of Visual Literacy, and Its Limitations’, in *Visual Literacy*, ed. by James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 1-10 (p.1).

⁶⁰ Elkins, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

⁶¹ Lisa Cartwright and Marita Sturken, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁶² Wendy Steiner, *The Colours of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation Between Modern Literature and Painting* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), p. 42.

Steiner's choices of 'spatial' and 'still' to describe the effect reveal two of the conventional lines along with the word/image distinction is plotted: temporal or linear versus spatial; and one-dimensional versus two. As Sontag notes in 'Against Interpretation', such differentiations partly account for those modes of literary criticism that privilege content over surface effect. The seminal declaration of this distinction between word and image is Gottfried Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon* of 1766, which defines literature as an art of time, and painting as an art of space.⁶³ Categorization by means of dimensionality similarly pivots on space as a defining feature of the visual image. In their introduction to *Reading Images and Seeing Words*, Alan English and Rosalind Silvester outline this fundamental difficulty of writing about pictures: 'Image-into-word 'conventions' quite clearly involve transpositions from two-dimensional or abscissa-ordinate determined space into a 'flatter' single-dimensional space'.⁶⁴ In other words, the visual image, when rendered in textual space, loses its presence, its innate image-ness.

Critics do challenge this word/image division, but it is generally the terms of the division that come under scrutiny, rather than the basic assumption that such a division does indeed exist. Mitchell effectively critiques the Lessing model of temporal versus spatial representation, but remains clear as to the extent of his conclusions: 'Nothing I have said here should be taken as a claim that the two arts become indistinguishable, only that the notions of space and time fail to provide a coherent basis for their differentiation'.⁶⁵

So the essential word/image division persists as a critical and experiential paradigm for a 'basic division in the human experience of representations, presentations, and symbols'. We might parse this distinction as a series of firm divisions between 'the seeable and the sayable, display and discourse, showing and telling'.⁶⁶ It seems, therefore, that the written expression's structural and ontological

⁶³ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: or, The Limits of Poetry and Painting*, trans. by William Ross (London: Ridgeway, 1836).

⁶⁴ Alan English and Rosalind Silvester, 'Introduction', in *Reading Images and Seeing Words*, ed. by Alan English and Rosalind Silvester (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 1-16 (p.6).

⁶⁵ W. J. T. Mitchell, 'The Politics of Genre: Space and Time in Lessing's *Laocoon*', *Representations*, 6 (1984), 98-115 (p. 103).

⁶⁶ W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Word and Image', in *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd edn, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 51-61, (p. 51).

differences from the visual image might preclude the literary text from participating in, or holding much relevance for, the contemporary's privileging of the visual.

This study wants to tell a different story. The literary text has a lot more to do with the visual than the narratives outlined above suggest. This is not an attempt to conflate word and image, but rather a wish to demonstrate the expansive ability of one to comment on the other. A literary text can reflect external visual conditions. And a visually minded critique of verbal representation can serve to draw out the nuance and implications of such reflections. This is a possibility that W. J. T. Mitchell does allow for. He writes of how 'the potential shift from word to image' is always there, even in the most spare, unadorned forms of writing and speech'. And correspondingly, in 'the act of interpreting or describing pictures, even in the fundamental process of recognizing what they represent, language enters into the visual field'.⁶⁷

My focus is specifically with the contemporary novel, its ability to comment upon and convey the visual in the absence of an actual image. Departing from typical critical assessments of prose's conversation with the image – ekphrasis, mimesis, enargeia etc. – I outline how visuality may work through a text in a holistic manner that locates fiction as an able participant in its visual culture. This detection of a text's interaction with a wider image field requires a specific critical approach, one that actively seeks out a work's visuality.

A text's visuality can be comprehended on a straightforward basis. A reader can focus on a text's literal relation to the image – taking into account font, colour, punctuation, line length, spacing – in an assessment of how a literary work might appeal to the eye. Richard Shusterman is one such proponent of this reading mode, urging the critical reader to 'grant aesthetic relevance to the visual aspect of the text'.⁶⁸ He laments that while writers may be attuned to this aspect, as manifest in modernism's typographical experimentation or concrete poetry, theory has failed to catch up. Shusterman outlined this view in an article of 1982 and to large extent the field is still largely undeveloped.

⁶⁷ W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Word and Image', pp. 51-52.

⁶⁸ Richard Shusterman, 'Aesthetic Blindness to Textual Visuality', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 41.1 (1982), 87-96, p. 88.

The work of Johanna Drucker provides a notable exception. Drucker's visual theory and book art exemplify an awareness of the printed word's underlying materiality and visuality. In *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing and Visual Poetics*, Drucker outlines text's ability to approximate the image:

Not all written language is produced directly by hand, but whether marks, strokes, signs, glyphs, letters or characters, writing's visual forms possess an irresolvable dual identity in their material existence as images and their function as elements of language. Because of this fundamental dualism, writing is charged with binary qualities. It manifests itself with the phenomenal presence of the imago and yet performs the signifying operations of the logos.⁶⁹

Smith's fiction can encourage a reading approach that bears writing's 'binary qualities' in mind. The author often puts to advantage the inherent visual properties of the printed word, implying that a text can be imagistic in the literal, as well as the literary, sense. In Smith's second novel, *Hotel World*, we see her starting to exploit writing's 'fundamental dualism', experimenting with how a novel's incorporation of elements of concrete poetry might produce meaning. The ghost of Sara Wilby narrates the first and final sections of the novel. Sara's loss of life, of corporeal presence, of identity, finds its correlation in her inability to remember the right words for things. Smith reiterates this loss of meaning through the spaces of her page, allowing typography to mirror content:

What's the word? Lost, I've, the word. The word for. You know. I don't mean a house. I don't mean a room. I mean the way of the .
Dead to the .
Out of this .
Word.⁷⁰

By means of its inverse, Smith implies that words do hold a kind of corporeal presence by taking up space on the page. She counteracts claims of the flatness, the single-dimensionality of the written page, and stresses how the look of a printed text is able to enhance its meaning: nothingness – of life, of memory – is literalized for the reader as blankness.

⁶⁹ Johanna Drucker, *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing, and Visual Poetics* (New York: Granary Books, 1998), p. 57.

⁷⁰ Ali Smith, *Hotel World* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 30.

We can see a more fully realized example of this visual writing style at the beginning of Francescho's section of *How to Be Both*. The artist's fall from the fifteenth century into the twenty-first is actualized as a zig-zagging of narrative across and down the page:

soft fleecy cushion (ow) what the
just caught my (what)
on a (ouch)
dodged a (whew) (biff)
(bash) (ow)
(mercy)
wait though
look is that
sun.⁷¹

Two pages long, this opening section might even be read as a direct claim on Smith's part to her text's entanglement with the visual art tradition. Smith compares Francescho's fall to that of Icarus, before going on to ekphrasize directly Pieter Breugel's painting of the event. She points out the 'flock of the nice / soft fleecy' sheep, she describes the

blue sky the white drift
the blue through it
rising to darker blue.⁷²

In alluding to this painting, Smith's passage claims as its predecessor two well-known works in the ekphrastic tradition: W. H. Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts' and William Carlos Williams' 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus'.⁷³ The choice suggests that the novel form, as well as the poetic, may aim at capturing the art image.

Returning to the ways in which Smith's work understands the word to be both a visual and verbal form, I suggest that repeated references to the written, printed or painted word within her fiction elicit an awareness in her reader of the text's visual potential, as something to be looked at, and not just read. Like Drucker,

⁷¹ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 4.

⁷² Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 4.

⁷³ W. H. Auden, 'Musée des Beaux Arts', in *Selected Poems*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 79; William Carlos Williams, 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus', in *Pictures from Breughel and Other Poems: Collected Poems 1950-1962* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1967), p. 4.

Mitchell comments on how writing can deconstruct ‘the possibility of a pure image or pure text’: ‘writing, in its physical, graphic form is an inseparable suturing of the visual and the verbal, the ‘imagetext’ incarnate’.⁷⁴ Smith’s close attentiveness to the pictorial aspects of the written word attests to this suturing.

In her first novel, *Like*, seven-year-old Kate anthropomorphizes the printed letters in her ‘One Hundred and One Great Wonders of the World’:

They can look like different people depending on what book they’re in or what sign they’re on, depending on how they’re written or painted. In this book the small a’s look sort of like small nice people with fat stomachs. The other way of doing a’s, the round way, makes them look like they have long faces. The capital M on Matterhorn looks like it’s had points sharpened ready for a fight.⁷⁵

Kate’s naïve, instinctual response to the letters in front of her reveals ‘a’ not as uncomplicated alphabetic symbol but as a potential image to be studied. Pointers like ‘in this book’ and later, ‘like they do here’, site Kate’s analysis in the physicality of a very specific page, possibly prompting Smith’s own reader to pay similar typographic attention. Kate’s observation brings to mind complementary genres that capitalize on the pictorial qualities of the alphabetic letter, such as artists’ books and animated or historiated initials. Smith’s text alludes to qualities that are predominantly the domain of the visual arts or the medieval manuscript.

Like medieval calligraphers who used word and image in tandem, producing ornamented letters to convey sacredness or visual puns to aid exegesis, Smith’s prose seemingly understands the visuals of a letter or word to be an active participant in producing meaning. A scene of multiple reading in *Like* – Smith’s reader reading Ash’s reading of Amy’s journal entry about reading a novel – demonstrates this enmeshing of style and content:

And one paragraph I remember studying in particular. Twenty words. *I am reading A Pair of Blue Eyes. The plot is rather unsatisfactory but the heroine deliciously vague and weak* I remember it even down to the underlining blue and firm and decisive under deliciously.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 95.

⁷⁵ Smith, *Like*, pp. 26-27.

⁷⁶ Smith, *Like*, p. 308.

Ash is clearly alive to the extra interpretative possibilities that a text's auxiliary visual attributes – underlinings, capitalizations, italics – afford. The look of the text is instrumental to Ash's remembering of it. This inset reading vignette hopes to promote a similar visual sensitivity in Smith's reader. It asks the reader to look closely and in doing so stresses the graphicness of the text at an elemental level: the etymology of the term – *graphē* – enfolds both writing and drawing.

Smith's prose, with its occasional typographic experimentation and metafictionality, invites such a reading approach. Playfulness at the level of the page's surface lays the ground for a more thoroughgoing examination of visual techniques and concerns. Cole's and Oyeyemi's work, on the other hand, shows little interest in the literal visibility of the printed word. We cannot easily read visibility from the literal surface of these works. Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief* includes photographs, but these operate alongside the text. The printed words themselves do not flaunt their materiality, as those in sections of Smith's prose do. So to understand how contemporary fiction intersects with visual culture on a fully comprehensive and integrated level, a more oblique approach is needed – one that relies on unearthing visibility from the text, regardless of whether or not the text announces its own interest in the subject.

In trying to establish what a visual critique of the text might look like, I take direction from a range of principles. The term 'visual thinking' is a particularly suggestive one; it combines looking and cognition in a way that might accommodate a conceptualization of 'visual reading'. Studies of aesthetics and embodiment that pivot on the concept – following Rudolf Arnheim – assume a link between perceptive individual and external reality: an 'important aesthetic dimension of meaning stems from the patterns of interaction with our environment that emerge from the makeup, situatedness, and purposive activity of our bodies'.⁷⁷

Image schema and body-based meaning are two such examples of visual experience's impact on meaning making. As 'a consequence of our embodied

⁷⁷ Mark Johnson, 'The Aesthetics of Embodied Life' in *Aesthetics and the Embodied Mind: Beyond Art Theory and the Cartesian Mind-Body Dichotomy*, ed. by Alfonsina Scarinzi (London: Springer, 2015), pp. 23-38 (p. 30); See Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (London: Faber, 1970) for an explanation of the term.

nature', Mark Johnson explains, 'meaning comes to us via patterns, images, concepts, qualities, emotions and feelings that constitute our perception of, and action in, the world'.⁷⁸ Many of these patterns are visually organised. Verticality, for instance, is a 'fundamental meaning structure' for humans and the influence of this structure filters into language. 'Up' and 'down' can 'mark all sorts of significant relations, from physical orientations' to 'abstract metaphorical relations'.⁷⁹ The point is that images already structure meaning, guide comprehension.

A study by Stanislava Fedrová and Alice Jedličková on 'Why the Verbal may be Experienced as Visual' intersects with this idea. It blurs the divide between representation and lived experience, outlining how textual description can create the preconditions for mental images. Fedrová and Jedličková suggest that if a painting can effect an experience of coldness or claustrophobia, then a work of literature might similarly generate a sensory impact. They read selected literary passages as examples of how 'poetic imagination meets with (or stimulates) sensory memory'.⁸⁰ A literary description's use of spatial markers such as 'up' or 'down' can give the reader an experience of being in the described space. The medium essentially becomes transparent; prose description that successfully prioritizes certain visual elements is capable of stimulating a holistic sensory impression for the reader, akin to viewing a painting.

The article suggests some productive strategies for a visually sensitive critical reading. Fedrová and Jedličková tell the reader what to look for in a text, if the aim is to read visually. Certain prose descriptions provide the basic conditions for stimulating a reader's 'visual imagination'; these conditions encourage 'dwelling on a particular passage'.⁸¹ The effective creation of space is one such example. Fedrová and Jedličková outline how architectural suggestions, the vocabulary of dimensionality, and striking metaphor or simile can combine to enliven the description of a space. Key to this enlivening is a stimulation of the reader's own knowledge, experience or memory. Description that relies on 'commonly used terms

⁷⁸ Johnson, 'The Aesthetics of Embodied Life', p. 23.

⁷⁹ Johnson, 'The Aesthetics of Embodied Life', p. 30.

⁸⁰ Stanislava Fedrová and Alice Jedličková, 'Why the Verbal May Be Experienced as Visual', in *The Aesthetic Dimension of Visual Culture*, ed. by Ondřej Dadejík and Jakub Stejskal (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp. 76-88 (p. 83).

⁸¹ Fedrová and Jedličková 'Why the Verbal May Be Experienced as Visual', p. 81.

for shapes and their metaphorical connection with other contexts and symbol systems, whether from nature or from various areas of human activity' enhance a description's capacity to make images in a reader's mind: it cements the link between representation and perceiving individual.⁸²

I incorporate aspects of Fedrová and Jedličková's approach into my own visual reading strategy. Reading a passage from *Open City* with some of their criteria in mind brings Cole's prose's visuality to the light. Julius, the novel's narrator, visits his old college professor:

He was seated at the *far* end of the room, *near* large windows, and he beckoned me over to the chair *in front* of him. His eyes were *weak*, but his hearing had remained as *sharp* as when I had first met him, back when he was a mere seventy-seven. Now, *bunched up* in a *soft*, large chair, *swaddled in* blankets, he *looked like* someone who had gone deep into the second infancy. But that wasn't altogether the case: his mind, like his hearing, had remained *acute*, and, as he smiled, the *wrinkles* spread all over his face, *creasing* the *paper-thin* skin on his forehead. In that room, into which always seemed to *flow a gentle and cool northern light*, he was *surrounded* by art from a lifetime of collecting. A half dozen Polynesian masks, arranged *just above* his head, formed a *large dark halo*. *In the corner* stood a life-size Papuan ancestor figure with *individually carved wooden teeth* and a *grass skirt* that *barely concealed* an erect penis.⁸³

Above, the typical descriptive devices of simile and metaphor feature: the professor *looks like* an infant, his skin is 'paper-thin'. But Cole's prose goes beyond the use of such techniques to produce its overall effect. The emphases throughout this passage are mine. The considerable number of italics here points up just how much of Cole's description is dedicated to sensory stimulation. One cluster is to do with the construction of a space. 'Far', 'near', 'in front', 'surrounded', 'just above', 'halo', and 'in the corner' sketch out the arrangement and limits of the room. Both reader and Professor Saito are fully immersed in the space. Cole takes particular care to frame the latter within this composition. The professor seems both part of this environment and enhanced by it; sinking in to his chair, but also distinguished by the halo effect of the room's ornamentation.

Attention to atmospherics enhances the reader's appreciation for the described environment. Interplay between darkness and light, blurriness and clarity

⁸² Fedrová and Jedličková 'Why the Verbal May Be Experienced as Visual', p. 82.

⁸³ Cole, *Open City*, p. 11 (my italics throughout).

characterizes the movement of the passage. The darkness of wooden masks arrests the flow of light from large windows. A carved penis is ‘barely concealed’. The reader’s visualization of the room is not comprehensive: details emerge only gradually, as Julius crosses the room. And so the description of the professor’s senses as variously ‘weak’, ‘sharp’, and then ‘acute’ binds the reader’s experience of the room to the nuances of the professor’s own sensory capacities – the relation between the two is one of analogy, of empathy.

Cole’s description is emphatically multisensory. An appeal to bodily feeling complements the reader’s appreciation for the overall visual impression of the room. Light is not simply registered by the eye. Rather it is something to be *felt*, as ‘gentle and cool’. The descriptors ‘soft’ and ‘paper-thin’ similarly gesture at a somatic appreciation for the space. An attention to texture throughout the extract serves both to stimulate the reader’s sense of touch and to further a sense of the space’s wider composition. Folds are a dominant form in this description: ‘bunched up’, ‘swaddled’, ‘wrinkles’. Draping and creases appeal to the touch and also stress the professor’s complete enfolding within the scene. This description’s various efforts to sketch out the look of the room, and the experience of being inside it, means that the reader experiences a similar immersion in the described space.

So Fedrová and Jedličokvá’s reading strategy is primarily to do with parsing how a reader might relate to striking textual description. The aim is to demonstrate how written text might translate into mental image, specifically how aspects of the text itself facilitate such a transition. Their approach is useful in that it encourages a slow considered attention to selected prose passages. And it goes some way towards suggesting an appropriate framework and vocabulary with which to tackle such descriptive episodes. The focus remains, however, largely with a consideration of the individual reader’s experience of a prose passage. Fedrová and Jedličokvá are primarily interested in the psychology of aesthetic experience. Their concern is with the link between representation and mental visualization, between perception and imagination. The primary object of inquiry is the reading mind, with the text itself coming second to this.

My own study also intersects with aspects of reader response theory. To say that a novel cites its wider visual culture is meaningless if such references remain undetected by its reader. Throughout, my argument relies on a consideration of how a contemporary ‘implied reader’ might approach the texts in question. This reader is

sensitive to visual effect and reference – they are a product of that same visual culture with which the novels themselves converse. Unlike Fedrová and Jedličková, however, I do not aim at unpicking the specific cognitive factors that allow for a text to be registered as a visual experience. Instead, my focus is more with developing a sense of how a critical reader might unearth and articulate a text's relationship to its wider visual environment.

In this sense, the text's staging of visibility at a descriptive level, along with a reader's initial appreciation for this visual aesthetic, is merely a starting point for a more comprehensive theoretical discussion. The point is to outline how surface effect and allusion are simply initial indicators of a novel's engagement with the wider principles and ethics of visual culture. My consideration of Cole's prose's relation to the ontology of the photograph, for instance, amounts to far more than a simple technical reading. I examine how *Open City* invokes the photographic object at a lexical and structural level: the novel's description consistently plays with the idea of a literary description as the material capture of an image. But the main point of such an analysis is to facilitate a wider reading of Cole's work's thematic engagement with visibility, as photography figures as a framework within which discussions of memory, and of representational reliability and authenticity can play out.

Much of Fedrová and Jedličková's terminology is borrowed from theories of the visual arts. Their study examines how prose description can 'stimulate a reader's visual imagination'.⁸⁴ It draws on aesthetics, on issues of dimensionality and spatial immersion, on shading and other lighting effects. As shown in the earlier comparison of Smith's prose with cinematic technique, approaching literary description from such a tangent can be fruitful. Following Sontag's direction that mining the theory of other disciplines might serve to enhance an appreciation for literary form, I look to studies that deploy this approach as possible models for my own reading practice.

Mieke Bal's *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* is one such study. The book is not specifically concerned with visual to verbal transitions, but instead makes a case for the multi-applicability of selected theoretical concepts across a

⁸⁴ Fedrová and Alice Jedličková 'Why the Verbal May Be Experienced as Visual', p. 81.

range of disciplines. Bal's study develops a mode of interdisciplinary cultural analysis. This mode is concept-based and methodologically fluid: 'interdisciplinarity in the humanities, necessary, exciting, serious, must seek its heuristic and methodological basis in *concepts* rather than *methods*'.⁸⁵ Concepts are dynamic, malleable: their meaning shifts depending on the discipline to which they are applied; as such, they can operate successfully within different academic spheres. We ought to set them to work as analytical tools, Bal argues, to illuminate objects from across a range of art forms: a text, a film, a painting or a piece of music.

Bal takes the concept of *mise-en-scène*, for instance, and broadens its applicability beyond the sphere of artistic practice: she deploys it as a 'theoretical concept for cultural analysis'.⁸⁶ Recourse to the idea of stage setting, Bal suggests, can illuminate the nature of theoretical work. The theatrical implications of the former expose how the latter constitutes a kind of 'thought-seeing', directed at a particular audience: 'the theatricality that *mise-en-scène* entails is perhaps the most profound manifestation of the cultural life that exists between private and public, or between individual and collective subjectivity'.⁸⁷ Both staging and theory amount to 'the materialization of the text – word and score – in a form accessible for public, collective reception; a mediation between a play and the multiple public, each individual in it'.⁸⁸

The theoretical work done by certain art installations exemplifies this mediation. In probing the concept of *mise-en-scène*'s critical potential, Bal applies it to a work by the video artist Bill Viola. *The Sleep of Reason* (1988) is comprised of a television monitor, lamp, and vase of flowers, all displayed on top of a wooden chest in an otherwise empty room. The television screen's content switches between two sets of images: the first is the head of a sleeping man; the second is an array of dreamlike and nightmarish visions. Viola's video effectively engineers the experience of being inside someone else's dream. The experience manages to stage both voyeurism and identification. Firstly, the viewer is in a position of control with respect to the unaware sleeping man's vulnerability. But secondly, he or she has unsettling insight into the sleeping figure's dream world – a dream world that, on

⁸⁵ Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 5.

⁸⁶ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 15.

⁸⁷ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 96, p. 99.

⁸⁸ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 97.

account of the installation's immersive nature, is experienced as if it were the viewer's own. Crucially, in order to see this footage a viewer must stand in the middle of the room: *mise-en-scène* establishes 'the viewer's central place in the boring, bourgeois bedroom that could be anyone's'.⁸⁹

In this respect Viola's piece acts more as a kind of didactic theoretical allegory than as a nuanced theoretical object. Bal's reading is not a wholly favourable one, but it does serve to establish the common ground between *mise-en-scène* and theory: both can engage in the attachment of abstract meanings to 'concrete, visible, and audible phenomena and signs'.⁹⁰ The look and physical arrangement of Viola's installation essentially 'stages the image – dynamic, multifaceted, deploying its activity between subject and sociality – of the viewer'.⁹¹ In leading her reader to this conclusion, Bal's analysis edges closer to achieving its stated goal of establishing the validity of 'the concept of *mise-en-scène* as a tool for a kind of cultural analysis that can overcome the still-open gap between social and psychoanalytical criticism, and between public and private concerns'.⁹² Following on from this particular example, her text proceeds to compare the effect of Viola's installation to a range of art objects. Throughout this analysis, *mise-en-scène* figures as the theoretical nexus point where the compared works and their stagings of subjectivity coincide and converse.

Bal suggests that trying out concepts such as *mise-en-scène* in different areas of study sheds light on the concepts themselves: 'while groping to define, provisionally and partly, what a particular concept may *mean*, we gain insight into what it can *do*'.⁹³ The principle aim of her study – as implied by the value that she attributes to the very act grasping for meaning – is to foster an environment of flexible interdisciplinary, and intersubjective, inquiry. 'I aim', Bal writes, 'to demonstrate how the variety of ways in which a concept can be brought to bear on an object makes for an analytical practice that is both open and rigorous, teachable and creative'. Her hope is that her sample analyses will 'open up venues for differentiated but specific use of concepts, as sites of both methodological openness

⁸⁹ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 115.

⁹⁰ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 97.

⁹¹ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 116.

⁹² Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 107.

⁹³ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 11.

and reflection and, hence, without the loss of accountability and intersubjective communication that so often accompanies such openness'.⁹⁴

Bal's study has both broad and specific applicability to my own. Broadly, *Travelling Concepts* is an argument for the benefits of interdisciplinarity. Concepts, in Bal's work, act as messengers that can travel across disciplinary boundaries within the wider field of cultural analysis. This framework allows for a comparison of textual representation with visual representation, through a consideration of how each medium might host and differently stage a given concept. Bal does not aim to deny the fundamental differences between selected representational forms. 'To avoid alienating practitioners of the various disciplines of the humanities', she writes, an appreciation for visual poetics 'works best if its primary starting point – but not outcome – remains the undeniable boundary that separates visual from linguistic utterances'.⁹⁵ But she does argue that the critic favour analytical flexibility and cross-disciplinary travel over policing the boundaries between media: 'I contend that thinking about visual poetics fares better if it avoids taking definition and delimitation as its starting point'.⁹⁶ A shared methodological ground needs to be established. If linguistic and visual artefacts – in this case, the contemporary novel and its wider image environment – arise in the same cultural context, then so too should they be considered within the same critical framework.

Bal's preference for close reading provides a further methodological pointer for this study. As noted, my analysis of Smith's, Cole's, and Oyeyemi's novels takes its cue from the technical specifics of the texts. For Bal, close reading is a fundamental tool of interdisciplinary analysis. The practice permits what Bal calls 'the empowerment of the object'.⁹⁷ It allows for the object of study to participate in 'the production of meaning' constituted by a given analysis.⁹⁸ My study is similarly keen to demonstrate how the contemporary novel registers its wider visual environment on its own terms – this is not about imposing a reading onto an object.

More specifically, my study engages with Bal's treatment of selected concepts. Many of the case studies in *Travelling Concepts* involve conceptual journeying across and within two fields in particular: linguistic and visual

⁹⁴ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 13.

⁹⁵ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 49.

⁹⁶ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 49.

⁹⁷ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 10.

⁹⁸ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 9.

representation. As such, they can prove helpful in figuring out how technical aspects of a text converse with visuality. Bal takes the structure of the ‘fold’, for instance, as indicative of how the concept of ‘image’ works as a theoretical nexus between literature and visual art. The fold has multiple connotations – it refers its viewer or reader both to the baroque aesthetic and to the idea of the fold developed by Gilles Deleuze. The function of this aesthetic motif is more than decorative: ‘as a figure it defines a specific type of thought’.⁹⁹ Through examining the fold, Bal reveals the concept of the image to be something that can accommodate both visual experience and theory. This particular form invokes a way of thinking; and this way of thinking is itself indebted to the visual aesthetic for its own organization and impact. Visuality and language are held together in a single image.

Bal’s reading can be brought to bear on literary descriptions that invoke the fold aesthetic, such as Cole’s description of Julius’s professor in *Open City*.¹⁰⁰ As I suggested earlier, this description of an old man in his study shows an interest in creases. Skin and textiles are bunched and draped. Blankets, furniture, and ornamentation envelope the professor. Stress on this aesthetic form and a saturation of descriptive detail similarly enfold the reader within the described scene. Fold, here, is rendered in textual form. Cole’s prose cites the composition in its word choice – ‘bunched’, ‘swaddled’, ‘wrinkles’, ‘creasing’ – and in its own pleated structure. The rhythm of the passage is measured, with details layering up each on top of the other. The description plays out on a predominantly vertical axis: Cole directs his reader’s gaze upwards towards the windows and masks, back down to the man and carved figure. This layering of rich detail enables the reader to feel the look of the fold through the reading experience. Rendered in textual form, fold here nevertheless carries a visual impact. It functions as an image, capable of engaging in and invoking both linguistic and visual effect. The concept itself is a multimodal one, and it also sheds light on how the targets of its analysis – here, textual description and visual aesthetic – supplement and support each other: ‘words convey images, which are, in turn, accessible through other words and images’.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 59.

¹⁰⁰ Cole, *Open City*, p. 11.

¹⁰¹ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 69.

In arguing for visuality as something that can be read, taking an interdisciplinary approach is clearly of great importance to this study. Indeed this study as a whole argues for – and hopefully demonstrates – the benefits of just such an approach. However, in taking such an eclectic methodological approach, I do not wish for the specificity of the considered medium to be lost. My argument begins and ends with the possibilities contained within the literary text. This is specifically about prose's engagement with the visual. Any novelistic display of visuality is necessarily a product of linguistic operations and arrangements. To this end, I concentrate on literary properties, such as metaphor, syntax, and compositional and descriptive methods, to provide three case studies of how texts register visual culture. The intention is to demonstrate prose's ability to unveil the complexities of the visual image.

I turn to the concept of remediation in order to clarify the exact nature of the contemporary novel's relationship to the visual. The term allows for a consideration of how the specifics of linguistic representation facilitate the extent to which a novel might host visuality. This is not about a fully integrated union between word and image. Rather it is to do with how one specific representational medium might emulate or feature another. Remediation denotes the incorporation or representation of one medium in another. Rembrandt's *Belshazzar's Feast* (c. 1636-1668), for instance, remediates a biblical even from the Book of Daniel, with the handwriting in the upper-right hand corner of the painting explicitly referencing its textual origins. Smith's *The Accidental* remediates Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1968 *Teorema* and, again, the thematic prominence of cinematography and photography in the novel acknowledges its plot's filmic foundation.

The term has its origins in Marshall McLuhan's work: 'The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name. This fact, characteristic of all media, means that the 'content' of any medium is always another medium'.¹⁰² But it is Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin who have firmly established the concept in media theory's critical vocabulary. Their seminal work of 1999, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, advances remediation as a defining, longstanding feature of media. Bolter and Grusin's analysis concentrates on 'visual technologies, such as computer

¹⁰² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 8.

graphics and the World Wide Web'; they argue that 'these new media are doing exactly what their predecessors have done: presenting themselves as refashioned and improved versions of other media'.¹⁰³

Remediation need not be solely understood from this perspective of new improving upon old. Frequently, the relationship works in reverse: photorealist and hyperrealist paintings, like those of Richard Estes or Glennray Tutor, reproduce the effects of a high-resolution photograph.¹⁰⁴ In line with this, Bolter and Grusin are clear in asserting their theory's divergence 'from the Hegelian concept of sublation (*Aufheben*), in which prior historical formations (like pagan religions) are sublated or incorporated by newer formations (like Christianity)': 'In the first instance, we may think of something like a historical progression, of newer media remediating older ones and in particular of digital media remediating their predecessors. But ours is a genealogy of affiliations, not a linear history, and in this genealogy, older media can also remediate newer ones'.¹⁰⁵ Nor does the inter-medial relationship need be defined wholly by its temporality; as in Rembrandt's painting, cited above, biblical text and visual representation simultaneously exist in the same space. It is within this conceptualization of inter-medial relations as both bidirectional and concurrent that this study explores how a novel remediates aspects of those other media forms – film, photography, painting – that make up its contemporary visual culture.

A further point to establish is the difference between remediation and other comparable labels. Repurposing, for instance, entails taking an aspect of one medium and using it in another: television and film adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* repurpose the plot of Jane Austen's novel. Ekphrasis performs a similar kind of borrowing. While the term is most commonly understood, as per James Heffernan's definition, as 'the verbal representation of visual representation', the term has also been subject to pressure and expansion.¹⁰⁶ Peter Wagner allows for 'all verbal commentary/writing (poems, critical assessments, art historical accounts) on

¹⁰³ David Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 15-16.

¹⁰⁴ See, for instance, Richard Estes, *The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum*, 1972, oil on canvas, 79 x 140 cm, The Guggenheim, New York; Glennray Tutor, *Duo (Made for the Two of Us)*, 2015, oil on canvas, 71.1 x 81.28 cm.

¹⁰⁵ Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, p. 55.

¹⁰⁶ James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), p. 3.

images'.¹⁰⁷ Laura M. Sager Eidt dismisses the requirement that the representation need be 'verbal' and applies the term to filmic representation, allowing for the description of a certain image in any other alien medium to be understood as ekphrastic.¹⁰⁸

For Bolter and Grusin, however, neither designation sufficiently attends to the question of medium. So while repurposing or ekphrasis simply entail the transposition of a particular work or genre from one medium to another, remediation is more specifically 'the representation of one medium in another'.¹⁰⁹ Crucial to this is a borrowing of the particular essence or properties of a chosen medium, rather than the simple transference of subject matter from one support to the next. Cole's prose's use of the aorist tense – a concept typically associated with photography – is one such example. Furthermore, Bolter and Grusin imply that there must be 'conscious interplay' in the remediating act; a conversation is staged between the properties of each participant medium, as one aspires towards, or is mimicked by, the other.¹¹⁰ And it is this rhythm that allows my previous examples of *Belshazzar's Feast* and *The Accidental* to be considered as remediation over straightforward repurposing: inset text and pervasive cinematographic allusion demonstrate awareness of the originating medium that is being carried over into host medium, text to paint and cinema to text, respectively.

Medium is a fluid concept. When taken in the plural form, the term denotes a means of communication. John Guillory tries to trace its etymological and theoretical development: 'The word *media* hints at a rich philological history extending back to the Latin *medius*, best exemplified in a familiar narrative topos of classical epic: *in medias res*. Yet the path by which this ancient word for 'middle' came to serve as the collective noun for our most advanced communication technologies is difficult to trace'.¹¹¹ Equally volatile is the term's development to signal a means of expression rather than communication. Although they situate their

¹⁰⁷ Peter Wagner, 'Introduction: Ekphrasis, Iconotexts, and Intermediality – the State(s) of the Art(s)', in *Icons, Texts, Iconotext: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality*, ed. by Peter Wagner, pp. 1-42 (p. 14).

¹⁰⁸ Laura M. Sager Eidt, *Writing and Filming the Painting: Ekphrasis in Literature and Film* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008).

¹⁰⁹ Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, p. 45.

¹¹⁰ Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, p. 45.

¹¹¹ John Guillory, 'Genesis of the Media Concept', *Critical Enquiry*, 36 (2010), 321-362 (p. 321).

study in the present mass media environment, it is within this tradition that Bolter and Grusin's work operates as it tries to entangle the essence of an expressive or artistic mode from the physical constraints of its medium.

The relation between medium and artwork is perhaps most strongly associated with Clement Greenberg's influential tenets of Modernism. Highly essentialist in approach, Greenberg set out a thesis for medium-specificity in the tradition of Gotthold Lessing's 'Laocoon', citing Modernism as its apogee: 'The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticise the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence'.¹¹² By this, Greenberg calls for a perfect alignment of content and form, to the extent that the latter essentially determines the creation and reception of the former. Artists must know the limits of their chosen medium: Modernist painting appropriately 'oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else'; with aspirations to tactility or three-dimensionality on the other hand, left to sculpture.¹¹³ Greenberg's insistence on artistic purity conflates subject matter, art form, and physical support. In Pablo Picasso's *Girl with a Mandolin*, for instance, subject matter of girl with mandolin, the art form of portrait painting and the physical support of oil on canvas are mutually determining.¹¹⁴

While the medium-specificity thesis still has currency for a range of artists and theorists, the prevailing trend in our contemporary multimedia environment is to challenge its assumptions. Noel Carroll writes of media's irreducible interrelatedness, of the impossibility of theorizing 'incipient arts', such as video or photography, without recourse to 'already existing purposes and strategies, e.g. portraiture, whose implementation perforce will recall the effects of other media'.¹¹⁵ Rosalind Krauss goes further, suggesting that we now produce art in a 'post-

¹¹² Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', *Arts Yearbook*, 4 (1965), 193-201 (p. 193).

¹¹³ Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', p. 194.

¹¹⁴ Pablo Picasso, *Girl with a Mandolin (Fanny Tellier)*, 1910, oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

¹¹⁵ Noel Carroll, 'The Specificity of the Media in the Arts', in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Robert Stam and Tony Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 39-53 (p. 42).

medium' age; media forms have become conflated and as such a Greenbergian search for purity must develop by different means.¹¹⁶

Neither medium-specific, nor so reactively post medium, Bolter and Grusin's theorization provides a useful way of maintaining a sense of a medium's distinctiveness: the intrinsic properties that allow us to recognise a painting as a painting, a photograph as a photograph. So while my analysis does not call upon medium specificity in a Greenbergian sense – i.e. a 'pure' relation between material form and expressed content – it does maintain an emphasis on the specifics of different representational forms. When Cole's prose emulates or remediates aspects of photography, it uses linguistic tools to do so.

But distinctiveness, Bolter and Grusin are clear to point out, need not entail separation. *Remediation* shows how the workability of clear-cut media categories is coming under pressure from an increasingly intermedial and innovative media environment. Bolter and Grusin separate out specific characteristics – i.e. the stylistic or structural qualities most associated with a particular form of art or expression – from the physical support of a carrier medium: a film's use of computer graphics, or computer graphics' borrowing from photorealism, for instance. It is this particular action that sections of my study replicate. In outlining contemporary literature's place in its wider visual context, I assess how novels might engage with this context at a technical level. Specifically, I consider how aspects of texts' composition instance a borrowing from visual representational forms.

The earlier analysis of a gallery setting in *How to Be Both* showed the workability of an analytical approach that brings an understanding of visual media forms to bear on the text. A consideration of literature within a film theory framework continues to play a significant role in this study. My readings of Smith's and Oyeyemi's works make clear the productivity of approaching novelistic expositions of looking and visuality with a mind to how film engages with these themes. Kaja Silverman writing on Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*, for instance, provides a way in to thinking

¹¹⁶ Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999).

about how literary scenes of looking present visual experiences as transformative ethical encounters.¹¹⁷

In looking to the theory of visual arts for a critical orientation, I mostly take my cue from the texts themselves. Cole's description often depends on photographic analogy, and so I use photography as a theoretical analogy for certain technical and thematic details in *Open City*. Oyeyemi's novels consider how race works as a visual construct, and so I read them as part of a long artistic and theoretical tradition that displays or grapples with the same issue. Smith's work, meanwhile, displays a continued fascination with visual representation in all forms. Smith's prose can be said to remediate an array of visual arts at a practical level, with such remediations serving as a basis for an engagement with the wider issues associated with these art forms. The main part of my study of Smith's novels uses portraiture as a cipher for the visual operations in the author's work. A consideration of her work from the perspective of film would also provide a productive and appropriate critical framework. And such an approach can serve here as illustrative the reading strategies that I deploy throughout this study.

Smith employs sites that facilitate or imply sight across her work to incorporate looking as a substantial feature of the text. In *There but for the*, the narrative and characters return intermittently to the Royal Observatory at Greenwich. The observatory structures the text but, crucially, it is also symbol and place of sight. In other works Smith capitalizes on museums as locations that rest on the act of looking; a significant proportion of *How to Be Both*'s action unfolds in London's National Gallery, or Ferrara's Palazzo Schifanoia. The cinema is one such prominent example of these sight-oriented locations, appearing frequently across Smith's oeuvre. In her first short story collection *Free Love and Other Stories*, a visit to the cinema defines two consecutive pieces.¹¹⁸ The cumulative effect of reading this collection is to stress the form's ability to depict the cinema-going experience, to establish the event as common practice of everyday life, but also as location for the extraordinary.

Cinema has undoubtedly had a formative influence on Smith's writing, with these short stories and *The Accidental* being the most obvious examples. But her texts' re-presentation of cinematographic experience does not operate at a purely plot

¹¹⁷ Kaja Silverman, *Threshold*, pp. 185-193.

¹¹⁸ Ali Smith, *Free Love and Other Stories* (London: Virago, 2002).

or setting-based level. Instead, cinema as a prominent location frequently achieves a thematic and formal relevance within her fiction. That is, Smith's prose's assimilation of filmic concerns and technique amounts to an effective and thorough literary device that supports her work's overall thematic concern with visual experience and associated acts of looking.

In *The Accidental*, for instance, novelistic and character formation are frequently inextricable from their cinematic origins. The cinema as physical location, along with the associated act of filming, pushes *The Accidental* and its characters into existence. The character of Alhambra – the apparent embodiment of film – has her literal, as well as figurative, origins in the cinema. The sight of Terence Stamp on screen arouses her mother, leading directly to her conception: 'My mother began me one evening in 1968 on a table in the café of the town's only cinema'.¹¹⁹ Shortly after this first filmic beginning, Astrid begins her own narration while 'taping dawns': 'All there is when you look at it on the camera screen is the view of outside getting more visible. So does this mean that the beginning is something to do with being able to see?'.¹²⁰

The implication is that there is a connection between seeing and being, stated at the very moment when the fiction is first coming into focus in the reader's imagination: novel comes to life as Astrid's camera starts rolling. Reminders of the novel's literal origins in film cement this implied correspondence between literary and filmic creation. As with Alhambra's cinematic conception, *The Accidental* itself is born of film: its central plot element – the disruptive arrival of a stranger into the midst of a middle class family – comes from Pasolini's *Teorema*. A reminder of this, 'Terence Stamp, an actor of such numinousness' and *Teorema*'s star, appears on the novel's first page.¹²¹

A sense of this novel's cinematic origins speaks to the wider, long-standing theoretical accord between the two mediums, as particularly embodied in the idea of auteurism. Auteur theory gained popularity with the French theorists of the 1950s, with texts such as Alexandre Astruc's 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La

¹¹⁹ Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 1.

¹²⁰ Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 8.

¹²¹ Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 1.

Caméra-Style’.¹²² Auteurism diminishes the importance of film crew, socio-cultural context, and other contributing factors in order to assign the director definitive authorial status. Within this framework, novel and film are analogous: they are both narrative forms that are products of a single creative mind. Robert Stam explains how literature was an important conceptual model for those who advanced the theory:

A kind of graphological trope, from Astruc’s ‘camera-stylo’ (camera-pen) to Metz’s discussion of ‘cinema and écriture’ in *Language and Cinema*, dominated the period. The French New Wave directors, many of whom began as film critics who were writing articles and making films as simply two forms of expressive writing, were especially fond of the scriptural metaphor. ‘We are always alone,’ Godard (1958) wrote somewhat melodramatically, ‘whether in the studio or before the blank page’.¹²³

For the purposes of my example auteur theory is useful in that it provides a framework for theorizing the cinema-text relation at the level of technique, as well as at invention. Working in tandem with auteurism, various critics have demonstrated the cross-semination of cinematography and literary styles or techniques. Drawing on these methods can show how Smith’s work remediates cinema through the very fabric of the text. It reveals how a literary response to a visual medium can operate effectively on both a discrete and holistic basis.

Sergei Eisenstein’s ‘Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today’ is a seminal text for an understanding of the film-text relation as elemental. The essay perceives an ‘organic’, ‘genetic line of descent’ from novel form to American cinema: ‘from Dickens, from the Victorian novel, stem the first shoots of American film esthetic, forever linked with the name of David Wark Griffith’.¹²⁴ As with Bolter and Grusin’s concept of a remediation that is bi-directional – older media working on new and vice versa – Eisenstein’s reading of the novel-film influence is a dyadic one.

¹²² Alexandre Astruc, ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Style’, in *The French New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, ed. by Ginette Vincendeau and Peter Graham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 31-38.

¹²³ Robert Stam, ‘The Author: Introduction’, in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 1-6 (pp. 1-2).

¹²⁴ Sergei Eisenstein, ‘Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today’, in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. by Jay Leyda (Orland: Harcourt Inc., 1997), pp. 195-256 (p. 195).

On the one hand, Griffith's montage technique might demonstrate the influence of Dickens's treatment of parallel action. But equally, re-reading Dickens through the lens of early twentieth century American film impresses a sense of 'Dickens's nearness to the characteristics of cinema in method, style, and especially in viewpoint and exposition'.¹²⁵ Following in Eisenstein's tradition, a variety of critical approaches have emerged for the matching up of cinematic and literary technique: Keith Cohen's *Film and Fiction* develops Eisenstein's montage theory, applying it predominantly to Modernist fiction; Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse* assigns a cross-medial applicability to narrative content and method, mapping particular structures into either novel or film.¹²⁶

The notion of a proto-filmic imagination, as intimated in Eisenstein's study of Griffith, or in David Denby's 'Gesture, Point of View and Proto-Cinema in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*', suggests that film as medium can exist independently of, and indeed prior to, its traditional physical on-screen manifestation.¹²⁷ It allows for a text's visual impact to be considered in filmic, or proto-filmic, terms. Smith's style is such as to make her work particularly amenable to such comparisons. As shown in the above study of *How to Be Both*'s gallery scene, the strong visual aesthetic of her fiction plays out through techniques, gestures, and tableaux that frequently incline towards the cinematic.

A short episode from the same novel exemplifies Smith's deployment of optical techniques that are closely associated with film:

and the boy's sprung up on his own feet like a leveret and off he goes too after her, and me too helplessly dragging after him like one foot's caught in the stirrup of a saddle on a horse I'm unfamiliar with who does not know or care for me: and as we go, out of the corner of my no-eye I see a picture by – Ercole, little Ercole the pickpocket, whom I loved and loved me! and wait – stop – is that, is it really? dear God old Motherfather it's Pisano, Pisanello, I know by the dark and the way it works the light.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Eisenstein, 'Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today', p. 206.

¹²⁶ Keith Cohen, *Film and Fiction* (New Haven: Yale, 1979); Seymour Benjamin Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980).

¹²⁷ David Denby, 'Gesture, Point of View and Proto-Cinema in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*', in *Reading Images and Seeing Words*, ed. by Alan English and Rosalind Silvester (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 137-55.

¹²⁸ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 38.

The rushed scene has a panoramic quality. The description sweeps back and forth across the gallery; Francescho's eye tracks George across the room, authoritatively guiding the reader's eye as the film camera does the viewer's. Grammatical form – long, loosely structured sentences in the present tense with little punctuation – supports the panning effect. The ease with which the reader is able to read this section correlates with Francescho's rapid representation of the movements. Variations in momentum – as Francescho pauses to note Ercole's painting – might even be analogised as a kind of speed ramping, a cinematic technique in which the capture frame rate varies over time. The episode synthesizes spatial and temporal form; current action and past memories unfold in sync with Francescho's rush across the room and her glances at paintings. The dominant stimulus for both reader and Francescho is visual: the opening zoomorphic similes relies upon an image of a sprinting hare to register its impact; we recognize Pisanello's work by its chiaroscuro.

A sense that an author's practice might be conditioned by film technique need not rely solely on an assessment of whether or not a text is open to having typical filmic structures mapped onto it. Returning to Eisenstein's formative evaluation of the literature-film relation, it is clear that a so-called film aesthetic may be detected in the chosen expressive mode of a novel without the work needing to be explicitly film-like. This is the case with Dickens, whose works pre-date the cinema by around half a century. For Eisenstein, a text's general visual approach determines its ability to capture a filmic imagination. He cites Dickens's close attention to detail as a key factor: 'Perhaps the secret lies in Dickens's (as well as cinema's) creation of an extraordinary plasticity. The observation in the novels is extraordinary – as in their optical quality'.¹²⁹

Smith's fiction can be approached similarly. The perceptual framework in her novels is frequently a visual one. Sight prompts narrative or meaning in a manner more commonly associated with film than with literary narrative. And yet, the technique is in evidence across the author's work. 'To the Cinema' functions as a dramatization of this visual privileging. As with Smith's gallery settings, visuality defines both plot and location of this short story. Set mostly in a cinema, the reader watches a cinema ticket tearer watching classical films while an unseen, admiring

¹²⁹ Eisenstein, 'Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today', p. 208.

audience member compulsively watches the ticket tearer. Verbs denoting sight dominate, attesting to a kind of semantic diffusion whereby actions that ought to be directed towards the inset films saturate the literary text: ‘I could see’; ‘I watched the man’; ‘I watched his wife’; ‘I see the moment’; ‘I watch everything’.¹³⁰

These acts of looking filter the reader’s own access to the story, as the narrative unfolds primarily by means of visual description, by the tracing of various multi-directional gazes within the text. So Smith’s promotion of the visual as predominant means of expression and comprehension extends beyond simple allusion: it affects the reading experience itself. Smith’s texts’ structural and lexical re-presentation of film is supported by an adoption of the intense visual affectivity that characterises the cinematic medium: filmic remediation functions on a comprehensive perceptual, as well as technical, basis. The cinematic texture of Smith’s prose is therefore not exclusively the result of a textual appropriation of film technique. Rather, it strives to prompt the same visually attuned response in the reader – and, I suggest, in the critic – that characterises that of the film watcher.

Visual media as diverse as a seventeenth-century still life painting or a contemporary abstract photograph each depend on the fashioning of the viewer’s gaze to realize their impact: a painter might exploit the contrast between matte and gloss oils, making certain objects pop to attention before the viewer’s eye; the abstract photograph’s occlusion of the subject in favour of colour, tone, texture, and depth demands a visual response prior to a cognitive one. Film montage is particularly indicative of this visual reliance; it depends on visual composition to propel narrative and to form character. And Smith’s descriptive practice is similarly motivated by a cinematic desire to make her reader look.

Throughout this study, this kind of closely focused technical analysis prepares the ground for a wider consideration of how a contemporary novel intersects with its visual environment. In substantial part, this intersection comes down to an engagement with the ethical concerns that surround the visual image. *Open City* considers the unstable referentiality of the visual image, offering it as an analogy for the workings of memory. Smith’s and Oyeyemi’s novels engage with essentialism, and how this relates to formations of gender and race. Since these issues are all

¹³⁰ Smith, ‘To the Cinema’, in *Free Love and Other Stories*, pp. 47-64.

issues that pertain to the visual image, it follows that visually oriented theory should be the most appropriate line of critical approach.

An application of film theory to aspects of Smith's 'To the Cinema', for instance, makes clear the workings of voyeurism in this short story. As explained, this story stages multiple gazes. The screen, the audience members and the ticket tearer watch or are watched to varying degrees – both by the narrative gaze and within the context of the story. This – and instances throughout Smith's fiction that parallel looking at images with looking at people – is a literary staging of the supposed inherent eroticism in the act of looking that cinema emulates and reinforces. Multiple gazes in this story map on to the 'complex interaction of looks' and attendant pleasures that Laura Mulvey identifies in viewing films: 'The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is scopophilia. 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'.¹³¹

Smith's short story is all about looking's pleasures. Firstly, it permits the reader a privileged perspective. The story's intrigue relies on allowing the reader a view onto the compulsive watching of the cinemagoer – the subject of this gaze, the ticket tearer, remains unaware. Secondly, and most importantly, this staged relationship never progresses beyond the stage of obsessive watching: pleasure resides wholly in the act of looking. As Mulvey explains in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', scopophilia 'arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight'.¹³²

In allowing this pleasure to play out in real terms – within a cinema context, but not on screen – Smith's plot hyperbolises and renders ridiculous conventional cinema's reliance on this particular pleasure structure. Reading Smith through the lens of Mulvey's essay discloses this short story as a critique of entrenched viewing practices, and recourse to film theory allows for greater specificity in articulating how Smith's fiction achieves this critique. The feminist standpoint of Mulvey's work is key in this respect. In trying to map Mulvey's dynamic of 'woman as image, man as bearer of the look' onto the gazes staged in 'To the Cinema', we notice that Smith

¹³¹ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. by Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 803-816 (p. 806).

¹³² Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', p. 808.

does not specify the gender of the obsessive watcher. The intimation is that both looker and looked-at could be women. Smith queries the standard division of 'active/male' and 'passive/female', allowing for the possibility of an active female.¹³³ So a fictional reworking of typical looking structures amounts to a challenge of the workability of such structures. And it is a cinematically influenced reading of Smith's text that allows such a critique to come to light.

As I hope this introduction has made clear, it is the reading strategies deployed, as much as the resultant readings themselves, that it are the subject of this study. Taken as a whole, this thesis is an argument for the productivity of reading contemporary texts with visibility and visual theory in mind. Words and images emerge within and respond to the same cultural and visual environment. They do so in different ways, but not without a substantial conversation and cross-medial borrowing taking place between the two. In recognition of this fact, literary critique needs to give full credit to the visibility at play within the contemporary novel. And in order to account fully for the workings of this visibility, it can equip itself with the tools of visual analysis.

This study's three chapters show how such an approach might work, and what kinds of readings might be produced when it is deployed. Many points of intersection emerge across the studies of the three authors. My discussion touches on so many of the issues that typically pertain to the image and visual representation: voyeurism, essentialism, referentiality. Race and gender, in particular, are shared concerns. The visual components of these constructs come up for consideration in the work of Smith, Cole, and Oyeyemi with as much frequency and urgency as they do in the wider cultural context. But the aim is not to produce a single version of how contemporary fiction responds to its image environment. The reality is that the novel form is an adaptable site; capable of incorporating, emulating, and reworking visual forms and concerns in multiple ways.

In this respect, I follow Noël Carroll's attribution of value not to theory itself, but to the act of theorizing: 'theorizing as an activity – an ongoing process rather than a product'.¹³⁴ The intention is to sketch out an approach that has traction not simply in relation to my three chosen authors, but more widely. Reading

¹³³ Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', p. 808.

¹³⁴ Noël Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. xiii.

contemporary fiction for visuality is of value both to the literary critic and to the art historian or theorist of visual culture. As the following sections will show, a visual approach can illuminate literary concerns and techniques. But, equally, the novel form has a lot to tell us about the structures and issues attendant on the image.

1.1 Writing in a Visual Context

In many ways, of all of the material considered in this study, Cole's fiction makes the strongest case for being read in visual terms. As I outlined in my introduction, Cole practices within both visual and verbal fields. He is a photographer and a photography critic for *The New York Times*. He has studied for a doctorate in Dutch art. His most recent book, *Blind Spot*, crosses genre divides, as it combines photographs with short chunks of essayistic and meditative prose. The influence of these varied visual interests is, as I will set out, readily detectable throughout his fiction.

And yet, these are not the terms in which Cole's fiction is typically read. The author was born in America but he grew up in Nigeria, before moving back to America to attend university. He currently lives in New York. Given Cole's joint American-Nigerian background, critics often see the author's fiction as exploring issues of belonging, and of mixed identity. Cole himself is an international figure, and his fiction bears out this influence. Its frame of reference is typically eclectic, participating within and borrowing from both Western and African literary and cultural traditions. Accordingly, critical studies of Cole also typically consider how his novels engage with ideas of globalisation, cosmopolitanism, colonialism and its legacy.¹³⁵

¹³⁵ See, for instance, Claudia Breger, 'Transnationalism, Colonial Loops, and the Vicissitudes of Cosmopolitan Affect: Christian Kracht's *Imperium* and Teju Cole's *Open City*' in *Transnationalism in Contemporary German-Language Literature*, ed. by Elisabeth Herrmann, Carrie Smith-Prei, and Stuart Taberner (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2015), pp. 43-64; Pieter Vermeulen, 'Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 37.1 (2014), 40-57; Bernard Ayo Oniwe, 'Cosmopolitanism and Challenge in Teju Cole's *Open City*', *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, 39.1 (2016), 43-65; Daniel O'Gorman, 'Gazing Inward in Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City* and Teju Cole's *Open City*', in *Fictions of the War on Terror: Difference and the Transnational 9/11 Novel*, by Daniel O'Gorman (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 40-75; Alexander Hartwiger, 'The Postcolonial Flâneur: *Open City* and the Urban Palimpsest', *Postcolonial Text*, 11.1 (2016), 1-17.

I can understand the rationale behind such studies and, for the most part, I agree with their individual arguments. But I want to read Cole differently. This author's fiction is as much about visuality as it is about the issues I that have listed above. And so, the predominant focus of this chapter will be on how Cole's prose reflects and engages with its wider visual environment on an aesthetic, a structural, and on a thematic level. That said, my readings do intersect to a certain degree with the studies that mentioned above. In the final section of this chapter, for instance, I consider what Cole's fiction can tell us about the, often uneasy, relationship between race and visual representation. This aspect to Cole's work clearly lends support to anyone who would wish to place it within a post-colonial critical framework. My focus, however, remains emphatically with the visual dimension of such concerns. My point is that, given the ocular nature of our contemporary culture, issues such as race, or identity more widely, necessarily emerge out of and disseminate through decidedly visual forms of reference and representation.

In this opening chapter then, I use Cole's fiction as a barometer of the extent to which contemporary fiction can mirror and critique the look and concerns of its wider visual context. I have two principal aims. Firstly, I hope that a close reading of the aesthetic of Cole's texts will sensitize us to the many and varied ways in which a text can show up in visual terms. And, in this way, it will allow us to pick up on visual detail from texts that do not flaunt their interest in the image to such a degree. As, in many ways, the visual aspect to Smith's description is less readily detectable than that of Cole's, and the visuality of Oyeyemi's prose is perhaps even subtler again. Secondly, I want to use this chapter to anticipate some of the theoretical and thematic issues that will arise across this study as a whole, and to lay the groundwork for some the reading strategies that I will deploy in respect of these issues. Cole's work thinks about what it means to look closely at things, or to look away from them. It reminds us of the complexities that attach to visual representation, and the ways in which the image can be put to misuse, or has been historically. These are all ideas that I pick upon and flesh out more fully in the two chapters that follow.

In the first instance, a range of allusions to art objects alert us to Cole's fiction's interest in the wider visual field. That a range of artistic precedents code Cole's writing practice is clear from just a cursory look at the author's description:

Three men sat playing cards in a corner of the café. Their dowdy clothes, the slow deliberation of their movements, and the clutter of bottles on the table cumulatively created an exact Cézannesque tableau. It was accurate even down to the detail of one man's thick mustache, which I could swear I had already seen on a canvas at the Museum of Modern Art.¹³⁶

Here, *Open City*'s narrator's understanding of his environment clearly forms out of familiarity with the visual arts, in this instance Cézanne's iconic images of card players. The passage speaks to Silverman's sense of the individual's internalization, and then re-projection, of a wider image repertoire, literalized here by the detail that Julius thinks he has already seen this image in a museum.¹³⁷

Similarly, in another instance Julius, *Open City*'s narrator, sees a painter's hand at work in a New York subway scene:

Everyone in the car seemed to be wearing black or dark gray. One woman, unusually tall, more than six feet, wore a black jacket over a long, black, pleated skirt and knee-length black boots, and the play of depth in these layers of her clothing brought to my memory the virtuoso black-on-black passages in certain paintings by Velázquez. Her pale, pinched face was overwhelmed, nearly, by the black of the clothes. No one on the train spoke and no one, it seemed, knew anyone. It was as though we were all listening closely to the rattle of the train on the tracks. The lights were dim.¹³⁸

This passage imprints a Spanish Golden age aesthetic onto a contemporary urban scene, with Cole's prose staging its own version of chiaroscuro. The interplay of light and shade is central to the scene's drama. A saturation of the word 'black' throughout the passage overwhelms the single concession to light, much as the woman's face is itself swamped by dark clothing. Both through the direct reference,

¹³⁶ Cole, *Open City*, p. 116.

¹³⁷ New York's Museum of Modern Art does not have a painting of card players by Cézanne in its collection, but the Metropolitan Museum does. Nevertheless, the image referred to is an iconic one. Whether Julius has seen the actual image, or representations of the image, the point is that he has seen it.

¹³⁸ Cole, *Open City*, p. 45.

and by means of its general visual tone, this passage asks its reader to see a Velázquez painting.

The image that Julius has in mind might be Velázquez's depiction of sister Jerónima de la Fuente (1620). Strong chiaroscuro characterizes this portrait. The subject stands against a flat dark background but the figure's robes, also dark, are rich in tonal variety. Light plays over the black fabric to give it depth and substance. Recalling Cole's subway passenger's clothing, Velázquez's nun wears a cape over a long black garment. Pleats also feature, and the subject appears tall. The white of the woman's face and wimple are accentuated against this otherwise dark set-up. Cole's narrator's way of seeing the world clearly enlists a range of visual precedents.

Above, Cole's prose shows a clear awareness of, and debt to, a wider visual context. And the assumption is that a reader will share this awareness. Prose that relies on an allusion to Velázquez in order to invoke a chiaroscuro effect relies on its reader having some basic awareness of the aesthetic invoked. In saying this, however, I do not want to imply that Cole's descriptive approach is in some way exclusive. The author's points of reference are not only historical, or taken from the canon. Rather, Cole's interest in the visual field is expansive and indiscriminating. Further to naming Cézanne or Velázquez, Cole cites more contemporary and popular images in aid of stimulating his reader's visual imagination. The point is that there is something for everyone here. We find, for instance, an attempt to sketch out an acquaintance's face by reference to Robert de Niro:

Farouq's face – all of a sudden, it seemed, but I must have been subconsciously working on the problem – resolved itself, and I saw a startling resemblance: he was the very image of Robert de Niro, specifically in De Niro's role as the young Vito Corleone in *The Godfather II*. The straight, thin, black eyebrows, the rubbery expression, the smile that seemed a mask for skepticism or shyness, and the lean handsomeness, too.¹³⁹

A comparison such as this plays roles both internal, and external, to the text. In the first instance, it contributes to characterisation; it divulges information about both of the characters involved. It tells the reader what Farouq looks like, but it also tells us how Cole's narrator thinks and sees. As I will outline in the following section, Cole's narrators show a remarkable sensitivity to the look of things. Secondly, the

¹³⁹ Cole, *Open City*, p. 121.

film reference expands the referential framework of the text, placing it in dialogue with the visual culture that exists outside of its fictional context.

And, even when Cole draws upon aspects of that visual culture that are perhaps less well known, the overall effect is the same; his fiction wants to stimulate some kind of visual consciousness or visually-attuned response in its reader or critic. An extended meditation on the work of the folk artist John Brewster, for instance, aims at appealing to a reader's visual sensibility. This scene, in which Julius visits the American Folk Art Museum, instances *Open City*'s general interest in the nature of the looked-at object, and in how it offers up its information. It is opportunity to list a series of items that solicit close looking by means of their display: 'weather vanes, ornaments, quilts, paintings'.¹⁴⁰ Throughout these pages, Cole's prose instructs its reader in the art of aesthetic appreciation. The details of 'an oil portrait of a young girl in a starched red dress holding a white cat' might be 'saccharine', but they fail to 'obscure the force and beauty of the painting'. Brewster's and the featured folk artists' lack of formal training does not preclude their work from having 'soul'. The 'stillness of the people depicted' and 'the sober color palette of each panel' lend the artist's paintings 'an air of hermeticism'.¹⁴¹ In all of these observations, a visual detail leads directly on to an evaluation, with bi-part sentences reiterating how one is the direct result of the former. Literary narrative, in this way, sets out a model for engaging with the visual object.

As this chapter progresses, I turn increasingly to photography as a comparative model for the visual interests and techniques at work in Cole's novels. I do so because I want to set out how a given novel's surface interest in visuality, as evident in passing allusions to art objects and looking practices, can accede to a more substantial organising framework for that novel. In part, I am motivated to do so on account of the author's own background in photography. But the main encouragement towards such a reading comes from the texts themselves; the affinities between the Cole's fiction and this visual representational form are striking. As I will set out, reading Cole's work with photography in mind has much to tell us about how his texts see and think, and what their main concerns are. And I

¹⁴⁰ Cole, *Open City*, p. 36.

¹⁴¹ Cole, *Open City*, pp. 36-37.

also claim that this conversation is bidirectional. In the first instance, taking a photographic approach to the author's fiction allows us to appreciate it and understand it anew. But equally, it also shows the way in which the novel can ably articulate how photography itself typically operates. My argument here, as with throughout this study, is that the contemporary novel is able to comment on, as well as simply reproduce, the images and viewing practices that make up its wider optical environment.

This focus on photography, far from constituting a narrowing of this study's scope, is an expansive move. Photography, as a relatively recent media form in terms of our visual history, borrows from the look and techniques of those images and imaging technologies that precede it. As such, the medium provides a way into thinking about general visual matters. Within its aesthetic and theoretical framework it encompasses, for instance, stylistic ideas to do with the use of light, or framing. And, as with its historical precedents, it also raises wider issues to do with the nature and the ethics of looking and representation. As Pierre Bourdieu summarises in 1965, photography's 'value and rhythms, its reasons and its *raison d'être* are borrowed from elsewhere'.¹⁴² Bourdieu's work on photography is a sociological study and not a piece of art criticism; his argument is that photography is emphatically a social activity, and not an artistic one. Nevertheless, his designation of photography as essentially eclectic remains widely echoed. And, I suggest, far from ruling photography out of art discourse, the medium's inclusive style actually brings it firmly into conversation with its better-established predecessors. It is on these terms that I think photography provides a valuable window onto the range of visual techniques and issues at play in Cole's texts.

As I will set out in the later sections of this chapter, there is one further key aspect to Cole's work that encourages me towards a consideration of its dialogue with photography. *Open City* is closely concerned with the operation, and failures, of memory. At first glance, this is simply a novel about the experience of walking, and reflecting, in the city. Cole's narrator is a contemporary flâneur. Large swathes of the novel are comprised of Julius wandering, without purpose or clearly defined

¹⁴² Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, trans. by Shaun Whiteside (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 71.

destination, through New York's streets. And the narrative structure itself replicates this lack of direction; *Open City* has no clearly defined plot progression or arc. A series of chance interactions and disconnected reflections on a range of subjects – music, art, politics, literature, city life, childhood – make up the narrative. As the novel progresses, however, wider themes and patterns do come into view. The novel's climactic moment, for instance, occurs when a past acquaintance, Moji, accuses Julius of rape: 'she said that, in late 1989, when she was fifteen and I was a year younger, at a party her brother had hosted at their house in Ikoyi, I had forced myself on her'.¹⁴³

The episode is structurally effective, essentially forming *Open City*'s climax. Its placement is also thematically motivated as, from this vantage point late in the novel, it prompts a reassessment of all of the narrative detail that precedes it. I will argue that photography is the most revealing metaphor for considering how this novel figures memory and narrative reliability. The two media forms, memory and photography, are closely affiliated; both are essentially to do with telling a version of events. John Szarkowski, one of the first to set out a framework for the critique of the form, saw selection as photography's 'central act':

The invention of photography provided a radically new picture-making process – a process based not on synthesis but on selection. The difference was a basic one. Paintings were *made* – construed from a storehouse of traditional schemes and skills and attitudes – but photographs, as the man on the street put it, were taken.¹⁴⁴

The 'act of choosing and eliminating', as Szarkowski understood it, is the medium's defining feature.¹⁴⁵ And, with this in mind, I read memory in Cole's fiction as explicitly cued to photography, over other forms of visual expression.

For the most part, my focus in this chapter is on setting out the basic terms of a literary text's engagement with visuality. In the first section, I detail the particular sensitivity that characterises Cole's narrators' looking habits. And I suggest that this

¹⁴³ Cole, *Open City*, p. 224.

¹⁴⁴ John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1969), unpaginated.

¹⁴⁵ Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*, unpaginated.

visual attunement effectively focalizes the narrative for the reader, encouraging him or her into a like visual intimacy, both with the world of the novel and with the wider visual field beyond its fictional borders. My visual reading of Cole's work then turns to an examination of contemporary visual culture's stylistic impact on prose. Here, I consider in particular the aesthetic sway that photography holds over the deployment of different perspectival forms. Moving beyond these surface effects to consider the structural affinities between the two forms, I then show how descriptive framing, narrative fragmentation, and the treatment of time in Cole's fiction show up well within a photographic framework. This consideration of time leads me to think about how *Open City* plays with the past. Memory, as I have mentioned, is my predominant concern here. In the final section of this chapter, I move beyond the thematic scope of Cole's fiction and the specific stylistic issues that it raises, to consider the relationship between representation and ethics more widely. My suggestion is that literary description, which can sustain invisibility as well as visibility, is a flexible space within which to consider how race operates. I raise the potential of invisibility, and then racial invisibility in particular, in my respective readings of Smith's and Oyeyemi's work. In my discussion of all three authors, ultimately my interest is in whether a novel that replicates aspects of its wider visual environment also has a didactic role to play in respect of that environment.

1.2 Looking Closely

In a recent promotion for his new photography collection, *Blind Spot*, Teju Cole writes ‘I think this is a time for thoughtfulness and close looking, and I hope this book will give you that’.¹⁴⁶ In the first instance, Cole wants to make a political point; he directs his comment at the contemporary political climate in America. But he also wants to forward his own images and writings as conducive to considered thought and, most importantly, close looking. This idea of close or proper looking is an important one for my study. The work of Cole, Smith, and Oyeyemi aims, in a variety of ways, to make the reader or critic attend closely both to textual surface, and to what lies beneath. This demand for attention at the level of reader response replicates a thematic point that runs through the fiction of all three authors: looking properly, these writers propose, can carry an ethical weight.

In this section, I set out how the principle of close looking is generative of Cole’s own descriptive practice. In later sections, I suggest that Cole’s fiction is also concerned with the ethical value of any such attention. Specifically, his work weighs up the limitations that can attach to looking, and being looked at, closely. But for now, my focus is on how Cole’s narratives develop out of an initial impulse to heed visual detail. This impulse produces three principle results. Firstly, it makes the surfaces of Cole’s texts into very visual things. I go on to make the same argument in relation to Smith’s and Oyeyemi’s fiction. So I will clarify here that when I claim visuality for a text in this way, I mean that it is visual in the literary, and not in the literal, sense. That is, a visual text is one in which isolated descriptive details and wider visual patterns feature to striking extent. So my concern is with these qualities, rather than with the actual aesthetic of the words printed on the page. Secondly, this tendency for narrative to dwell on visual detail urges the reader do likewise. And it is in this capacity that the concept of close looking has a bearing on reader response. Thirdly, this attentive outlook prepares the ground for, as I will set out later, a more

¹⁴⁶ ‘It’s not out for another eighteen days (you can pre-order) but Time Magazine says ‘Blind Spot’ is one of the best non-fiction books of the year so far. I think this is a time for thoughtfulness and close looking, and I hope this book will give you that. I’ll have details soon about a number of New York City events in mid-June around the launch’; Teju Cole, *Facebook* post, 25th May 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10154818618637199&id=200401352198> [accessed 13 June 2017].

rigorous thematic investigation in Cole's work into the ethical implications of such an outlook.

Julius in *Open City* is a contemporary flâneur.¹⁴⁷ And we might apply the same label to the narrator of *Every Day Is for the Thief*. Much of the critical interest in Cole's work picks up on this aspect, tracing how the author's fiction participates in and disrupts the tradition of literary flânerie. Alexander Hartwiger, for instance, names Julius in *Open City* as a postcolonial flâneur. Through the adoption of this specific narratorial stance, Hartwiger argues, Cole's novel mounts a critique of cosmopolitanism. '*Open City*', Hartwiger writes, 'provides a departure from the celebratory cosmopolitanism of the 1990s, as well as today's rhetoric surrounding the formation of the global citizen, to offer a stark account of the varying experiences of those who find themselves without the cultural and economic capital to move seamlessly across cultures and borders'.¹⁴⁸ Crucial for this departure is the postcolonial flâneur's unique perspective on the city and its inhabitants, which alternates between 'dominant and non-dominant viewpoints'.¹⁴⁹ Julius is at once marginal to and enmeshed in city life, and his stance is above all a critical one: 'Cole's rewriting of the flâneur from a postcolonial perspective inverts the point of view of the Parisian flâneur, moving away from the totalizing colonial gaze to a more critical one that recognizes the complex flows of capital and people'.¹⁵⁰

As I mentioned in my introduction to this chapter, much of the critical work on *Open City* operates within a similar framework, reading the novel as either a

¹⁴⁷ The term is synonymous with Paris on the cusp of modernity. In his readings of Charles Baudelaire, and through his own walking in the Arcades Project, Walter Benjamin sets out a profile of the flâneur. The figure is a stroller, observer and commentator. Benjamin's version of the type is tied to a social, geographical and historical specificity: when 'the disappearance of the arcades made strolling go out of style and gaslight was no longer considered fashionable', the flâneur also declined. But his descendants – the original flâneur is male – continue to populate literature and visual art, beyond the habitat of the Parisian arcades. See Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973); Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

¹⁴⁸ Hartwiger, 'The Postcolonial Flâneur', p. 1.

¹⁴⁹ Hartwiger, 'The Postcolonial Flâneur', p. 3.

¹⁵⁰ Hartwiger, 'The Postcolonial Flâneur', p. 5.

mirror or a critique of contemporary cosmopolitanism and globalization. And, generally, such readings are very persuasive. However, I want to consider Cole's reworking of *flânerie* from a different angle. My aim is to refocus attention on the specific quality of *flâneur* narration, outside of its operation within a particular social or economic context. Above all, I think, Cole chooses this particular narratorial mode because of the visual aspect that it can lend to a text. Looking, as much as walking, is the typical preserve of the *flâneur*. And on these terms, *flânerie* provides the rationale for any literary description that wants to foreground this very act.

This privileging of sight and visual detail is clearest in *Open City*'s many passages of urban walking. Prose description sets out in detail the co-ordinates of these walks, as well as sights seen along the way. A passage from the novel's opening pages is characteristic of such accounts:

As Fifty-ninth street was cordoned off, I walked down to Fifty-seventh and came back up again to join Broadway. The subway was too congested at Columbus Circle, and so I walked toward Lincoln Center, to catch the train at its next uptown stop. At Sixty-second Street, I fell in with a lithe man with graying sideburns who carried a plastic bag with a tag on it and was visibly exhausted, limping on slightly bowed legs. He wore shorts and black tights, and a blue, long-sleeved fleece jacket. From his features, I guessed he was Mexican or Central American.¹⁵¹

As with much of the novel's walking narrative, names of streets and buildings intersperse the description at steady intervals. Mapping out the city in this measured way, the passage re-presents the onward movement of the walk through the progression of the text. Further to being affective through spacing, geographical accuracy also allows a reader to picture the walk. But the passage's appeal to the eye is not directed only at those readers who are familiar with the city. Throughout, visual information is privileged. Julius sees exhaustion in a man's gait. He reads facial features, and reads them for race in particular. In the final chapter, Oyeyemi's fiction will prove textual description is well placed to explain and critique this kind of appearance-based racial attribution. But in this instance, I simply want to stress that, for Cole's *flâneur* narrator, visual surface is all-important.

In explanation of the *flâneur*'s sensitive eye, Susan Sontag turns to the figure of the street photographer. Cole's work will show that further affinities between

¹⁵¹ Cole, *Open City*, pp. 14-15.

literary practice and the field of photography can unfold. Here, Sontag's comparison draws out the emphatically visual nature of *flânerie*:

Gazing on other people's reality with curiosity, with detachment, with professionalism, the ubiquitous photographer operates as if that activity transcends class interests, as if its perspective is universal. In fact, photography first comes into its own as an extension of the eye of the middle-class *flâneur*, whose sensibility was so accurately charted by Baudelaire. The photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitring, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes.¹⁵²

Sontag locates the correspondence between the *flâneur* and the photographer in their shared capture of the city's 'unofficial reality'. Eugene Atget's 'twilight Paris of shabby streets and decaying trades' or Arnold Genthe's images of San Francisco's chinatown exemplify this attitude.¹⁵³ Walking through the city, for both *flâneur* and photographer, is emphatically a visual experience. The former anticipates the latter in how he or she learns to process a stream of visual impressions, deploying a gaze that is both detached and penetrating. Rob Shields summarizes: 'Observation is the *raison d'être* of the *flâneur*, and seeing visual lures is the key to the *flâneur*'s movement, drawn from sight to sight. The visual could be said to be the *primum mobile* of the *flâneur*'s being'.¹⁵⁴

Julius's walks around New York in *Open City* display this exact visual orientation. The reader's impression of the city arises wholly from what Julius notices or seeks out with his gaze. Narrative flits from one visual impression to another. It either lingers with the image for only a moment, or continues for just as long as it holds the narrator's attention or sparks a thought:

I noticed the masses of leaves dying off in bright colours, and heard the white-throated sparrows within them calling out and listening. It had rained earlier, and the fragmented, light-filled clouds worked off each other; maples and elms stood with their boughs still. Above a boxwood hedge, the swarm of hovering bees reminded me of certain Yoruba epithets for Olodumare, the supreme deity: he who turns blood into children, who sits in the sky like a cloud of bees.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), pp. 42-43.

¹⁵³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 43.

¹⁵⁴ Rob Shields, 'Fancy Footwork: Walter Benjamin's Notes on Flânerie', in *The Flâneur*, ed. by Keith Tester (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 61-80 (p. 65).

¹⁵⁵ Cole, *Open City*, p. 42.

Here, a highly wrought descriptive image gives way to a striking mental one. But, with reader interest surely held, Cole abruptly ends both paragraph and vignette. After a momentary lull, the description quickens to take in new sights: ‘a cove formed by two large rocks’, ‘a pile of gravel’, and ‘a trickle of blue, seen through the buildings to the west’.¹⁵⁶ Description follows on from where the eye leads. Sight, rather than rational sequence or development, drives this narrative. The result is a prose style that mimics the ungovernability of eye movements, and the associations that images provoke. Written text, on these counts, goes some way towards conveying the actualities of the flâneur or street photographer’s practice.

Chance largely decides where the eye falls, a detail that perhaps makes us think of the street photograph’s reliance on luck, as much as on technique. There is a sense throughout Cole’s work that the narrator’s positioning in the right place at the right time accounts for which descriptive details end up with the reader. ‘One morning, walking outside the estate to where the Isheri Road joins the Lagos-Sagamu Expressway Bridge’, Cole writes in *Every Day Is for the Thief*, ‘I witness a collision between two cars’.¹⁵⁷ Another accident in *Open City* similarly emblemizes the contingency of sights seen when walking through a city. The crash offers up a vivid tableau, with ‘the bright red of the fire truck’ appearing as ‘a gash across the empty road’.¹⁵⁸ Julius’s encounters with others also have this accidental quality. A meeting with his former professor comes about ‘entirely by accident’, ‘just outside a grocery store not far from Central Park South’.¹⁵⁹ Later, there is a ‘sudden reencounter’ with an old acquaintance in a grocery store in Union Square.¹⁶⁰

Further to their reliance on chance, these meetings suggest another correspondence between Cole’s descriptive practice and that of the flâneur or street photographer: the superficiality of city interaction. Benjamin, in reading flânerie from Baudelaire’s poetry, designates sight as a key factor in urban social interaction. He quotes from Georg Simmel’s *Soziologie* by way of explanation:

¹⁵⁶ Cole, *Open City*, pp. 42-43.

¹⁵⁷ Cole, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, p. 65.

¹⁵⁸ Cole, *Open City*, p. 242.

¹⁵⁹ Cole, *Open City*, p. 10.

¹⁶⁰ Cole, *Open City*, p. 156.

Someone who sees without hearing is much more uneasy than someone who hears without seeing. In this there is something characteristic of the sociology of the big city. Interpersonal relationships in big cities are distinguished by a marked preponderance of the activity of the eye over the activity of the ear.¹⁶¹

The idea is that the modern city co-opts inhabitants into visual closeness, but that this does not translate into actual intimacy. Such detachment marks Julius's interactions on the streets of New York. His contact with others is generally predicated on sight, rarely developing beyond this. He might outline, for instance, passengers in a subway car; a collection of 'inwardly focused city types', a man in 'a pumpkin-coloured jacket, and next to him a woman in a sky blue ski jacket'.¹⁶² Description plays over appearances, but any real sense of these people remains imperceptible.

The narrator maintains a similar distance with friends. 'Coming up the hill to my place, just as I crossed the corner of 121st', Julius recalls, 'I saw my friend. He lived only a few blocks away, and had been out shopping for groceries. I hailed him, and we spoke briefly'.¹⁶³ Such meetings are generally fleeting. Here, the reader does not overhear the conversation. The narrative lapses into background detail and Julius's thoughts turn inward. He thinks about jazz and a recent break-up, anticipating calling an ex-girlfriend later. This distorted and flitting temporality, by which past and future encroach on the present, characterises much of the novel's prose. As a result, present experience itself is largely loosely defined, constituted only by a collage of images lacking in depth or development.

I consider the ethical implications of Cole's narrators' distanced outlook in this chapter's final section. But for now I want to flesh out further my point that, by establishing a particular narratorial mode, a text can enhance its capacity for visuality: in this case, the flâneur narrative appears as a genre in which visuality can accede to a generating principle for literary description. But this accord between sight and literary description is not entirely specific to the flânerie tradition. Rather, any text can ably make itself into more of a visual thing by means of a range of narratorial devices. Smith, for instance, uses the device of narrator as fresco painter in *How to Be Both*. As my next chapter shows, the author deploys Francescho's role

¹⁶¹ Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, pp. 37-38.

¹⁶² Cole, *Open City*, p. 45.

¹⁶³ Cole, *Open City*, p. 23.

as artist as a device to bring colour and visual interest to the novel. Many of the narrators in Oyeyemi's work also possess a heightened sensitivity to the look of things. And any such sensitivity necessarily filters down to impact both upon a text's description, and the reader's reception of it. The key thing here is that, across the work of all three authors, literary narrators are also close lookers.

Novelistic narration has a ready-made capacity to support and sustain this kind of close looking. The concept of focalization is key to understanding how this might work. Focalization directs and filters the reader's experience of the text. In *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Gérard Genette outlines three variants of focalization: zero focalization, internal focalization, and external focalization. Most relevant for my purposes is internal focalization, which is a device whereby a first person narrator functions as the focalizer.¹⁶⁴ Genette intends the term to be used in explanation of how, and what, information ends up with the reader. The premise is that the reader's knowledge corresponds to that of the focal character. I want to adjust focalization's emphasis slightly. My interest is less with *what* information a text communicates, and more with *how* a given text communicates. In this framework, attentive focalizers can induce a similar visual sensitivity in their readers so that focalization encompasses a particular visual orientation, as well as a cognitive element.

This understanding of focalization is keyed to Mieke Bal's reworking of the concept. As Bal outlines in *Travelling Concepts*, this attribution of visuality to focalization is something that narrative theory too often glosses over. Bal writes of how 'in narrative theory, the concept of focalization, although clearly visual in background, has been deployed to overcome visual strictures and the subsequent metaphorical floundering of concepts such as 'perspective' and 'point of view'.¹⁶⁵ Bal's reformulation of the term firmly brings the visual back into play. Her starting point is the interaction between focalization and the concept of the gaze. 'These

¹⁶⁴ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 189; Genette gives two of Henry James's works as examples: *The Ambassadors* and *What Maisie Knew*. While focalization does not always issue from a narrator, the designation is clearly relevant to Cole's first-person narratives: the reader's experience of events in *Every Day Is for the Thief* and *Open City* come via these works' internal narrators.

¹⁶⁵ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 36-37.

concepts are different but affiliated', she writes. 'They are often conflated, with disastrous results, or, alternatively, kept separate, with impoverishing results'.¹⁶⁶

According to Bal, an obvious affinity between focalization and gaze argues for the applicability of each term to the discipline within which the other is typically deployed: narrative theory, and visual studies, respectively. She explains the association:

"focalization" is a narrative inflection of imagining, interpreting, and perception that *can*, but need not, be visual "imaging". To conflate "focalization" with the "gaze" would be to return to square one, thus undoing the work of differentiation between two different modes of semiotic expression. Secondly, and conversely, the projection of narrativity onto visual images is an analytic move that has great potential but is also highly specific. To put it simply: not all images are narrative, any more than all narrative acts of focalization are visual. Yet narratives and images have *envisioning* as their common form of reception. The differences and the common elements are equally important.¹⁶⁷

So each object, text and image, warrants an integrated understanding of the narrative and visual elements at play. By associating focalization with the gaze in this way, Bal brings the visual dimension of the former to the fore. Her point is that producing or reading literary narrative is, to some extent, already a visual act. Literary description, as Bal recasts it, is to do with making its reader look.

This principle applies to Cole's, Smith's, and Oyeyemi's respective narrative practices. These three authors all build their texts in such a way as to bring the affinity between reading and envisioning to the fore. Yet the picturing that Cole's writing prompts is particularly full, as the narrative reaches its reader through the lens of a very visually attuned narrator. My lens analogy here, far from risking the 'metaphorical floundering' that Bal attributes to concepts such as perspective or point of view when deployed in literary criticism, is key. For, by transferring aspects of photography's mechanics to his narrators' mental and optical processes, Cole explicitly sets his narrators up as camera-like. In the following section, I explain how a photographic aesthetic can be read off the surface of this author's work. But before doing so, it is worth stressing that any such aesthetic stems from an overarching affinity between writing or reading, and picturing.

¹⁶⁶ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 35.

¹⁶⁷ Bal, *Travelling Concepts*, p. 38.

Of all of the descriptive moments across the work of my three considered authors, Cole's use of camera analogies provides the fullest articulation of this affinity. According to this analogy, narrating is like taking pictures. And reading is akin to looking at the resulting snapshots. Across his fiction, Cole uses photographic terminology to describe narratorial perception. In *Every Day Is for the Thief*, for instance, we find a direct comparison of narrator with camera; a woman appears 'evanescent as an image made with the lens wide open'. The image of this woman is 'seared' into Cole's narrator's mind.¹⁶⁸ And similar analogies feature throughout the author's work. An 'assortment of inwardly focused city types' persists in Julius's mind, 'swirling' in his mind long after the actual disappearance.¹⁶⁹ Faces leave an 'impress' on his eyes.¹⁷⁰ Important in all of these examples is Cole's stress on the agentive, material nature of thing perceived. The verbs that accompany these visual images all imply physical action: they fix onto or swirl within the narrator's mind. The impression is one of imposition, as the narrator's mind figures as a plate set up for the reception and recording of external phenomena. As with the photograph that bears a material relation to its moment of conception, Cole's protagonists narrate as if their thoughts and visualizations were direct products of an earlier, physical encounter.

A closer look at the context of my third example furthers our sense that, for Cole, the capture and relay of narrative is like the taking and display of pictures. 'Walking through busy parts of town', Julius narrates, 'meant I laid eyes on more people, hundreds more, thousands even, than I was accustomed to seeing in the course of a day, but the impress of these countless faces did nothing to assuage my isolation'.¹⁷¹ 'To lay eyes on something' is a standard figure of speech. But when coupled with 'impress' and the detail that Julius later lies awake 'sorting' these images, 'trying to figure out which belonged where, which responded to which', the expression takes on a greater significance. The paragraph's progression amounts to the various steps of chemical photographic procedure being given literary expression. Julius's mind figures as the recording medium, imprinted with the images that the eye actively seeks and captures. And the discreteness of these

¹⁶⁸ Cole, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, p. 43.

¹⁶⁹ Cole, *Open City*, p. 45.

¹⁷⁰ Cole, *Open City*, p. 6.

¹⁷¹ Cole, *Open City*, p. 6

received pictures, their status as individual material objects in need of ‘sorting’, is a uniquely photographic conception of the image.

Julius’s sensitivity to light further persuades us to consider his looking and narrating as photographic in orientation. Light, for this narrator, is not just an object of aesthetic appreciation. It is also a physical precondition for the production of images. Narration depends on favourable lighting conditions and if these are lacking, Julius is unable to capture and convey an image to the reader. There are moments throughout the novel when, irritated by a certain intensity of light, the description quickly moves on from a particular sight or setting. ‘The crowd was brightly attired, and looking at all that green, red, yellow, and white synthetic material in the sun hurt the eyes’, prompting the narrator to ‘escape’ inside.¹⁷² This sensitivity has a psychological component. The ‘light affects’ Julius’s ‘ability to be sociable’.¹⁷³ When feeling ‘more irritated than usual with the paperwork and small talk’, he becomes ‘oversensitive to the hospital’s white lights’.¹⁷⁴

Such instances build to imply an internalization of photographic praxis as experienced somatically, by means of an acute responsiveness to light. A comparison of psychiatric practice with the development of a photographic image secures this reading. Julius tells a friend:

I told him that I viewed each patient as a dark room, and that, going into that room, in a session with the patient, I considered it essential to be slow and deliberate. Doing no harm, the most ancient of medical tenets, was on my mind all the time. There is more light to work with in externally visible illnesses; the Signs are more forcefully expressed, and therefore harder to miss. For the troubles of the mind, diagnosis is a trickier art, because even the strongest symptoms are sometimes not visible. [...] But what are we to do when the lens through which the symptoms are viewed is often, itself, symptomatic: the mind is opaque to itself, and it’s hard to tell where, precisely, these areas of opacity are.

In this passage, Julius develops a diagnosis as he would develop an image. Cole’s narrator has a clear appreciation for how variations of light and darkness disclose or obscure meaning. A cross-semination of aesthetic feature and cognitive result gives rise to the standard metaphor of seeing as knowing. But here, given my point about

¹⁷² Cole, *Open City*, p. 8.

¹⁷³ Cole, *Open City*, p. 193.

¹⁷⁴ Cole, *Open City*, p. 43.

photography, the literal meaning of figurative terms, such as ‘opaque’ and ‘opacity’, is salient. Again, the production of narrative relies on favourable imaging conditions.

My overall point is that both Cole’s camera metaphors and Bal’s reworking of focalization aim at reasserting a kinship between writing or reading, and looking. I carry this idea forward into my subsequent readings of how Cole’s, Smith’s, and Oyeyemi’s narratives operate, and what reader response they elicit. Looking closely, for these three authors, is both generative of literary description and, as I will later suggest, a guiding principle for coming into a more ethical relation with the world.

1.3 A Photographic Aesthetic

In *Open City*, Julius visits the International Center of Photography in New York. Martin Munkácsi's work is on show. As we might expect, Julius looks closely at these images. And the passage's analytic tone encourages the reader to do likewise. Julius describes the prints as 'unexpectedly lively', and sets out the dynamism of Munkácsi's journalism: 'he liked sports poses, youth, people in motion'. The shots are 'so carefully composed but always seemed to have been taken on the go'.¹⁷⁵ Julius picks out one particular image of 'three African boys running into the surf in Liberia'. This photograph, *Boys at Lake Tanganyika* (c. 1930), is a black and white multi-textured shot of three silhouettes in motion, framed against white spray.

Cole's narrator explains how from this image, with its precarious expression of both chaotic movement and perfect balance, Henri Cartier-Bresson 'developed the ideal of the decisive moment':

Photography seemed to me, as I stood there in the white gallery with its rows of pictures and its press of murmuring spectators, an uncanny art like no other. One moment, in all of history, was captured, but the moments before and after it disappeared into the onrush of time; only that selected moment itself was privileged, saved, for no other reason than it having been picked out by the camera's eye.¹⁷⁶

Here, Julius suggests that photography's defining feature is its ability to isolate and freeze a single chance impression. And Cartier-Bresson's street photography, following Munkácsi, is paradigmatic in this respect. An image of a man leaping over a body of water behind the Gare Saint-Lazare in Paris, for instance, is typical of Cartier-Bresson's compositions. Replication of various geometric shapes gives the image formal cohesion: there are triangular rooftops in the background, the reflection of a fence in the middle distance, and repeating circles in the foreground. The picture also has that characteristic blend of movement and stability: it captures its subject in mid-air, a split-second before his foot hits the water and disturbs the reflection.¹⁷⁷ For Julius, photography is unique in its ability to pick out and fix a

¹⁷⁵ Cole, *Open City*, p. 152.

¹⁷⁶ Cole, *Open City*, p. 152.

¹⁷⁷ Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Behind the Gare St. Lazare*, 1932, gelatin silver print, 35.2 x 24.1 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

pregnant moment. Conscientious framing and selection motivates Munkácsi or Cartier-Bresson's practice, with the final image likely bearing an arbitrary relation to the wider context from which it is taken.

But coming to Cole's own prose with photographs of city streets in mind, we find that textual narrative can also lay claim to these qualities. Descriptive instances throughout the narrative show up as decisive moments, as in this example from *Every Day Is for the Thief*:

through the gray scrim of the rolled-up windows, I see a swarm of lime-green shirts and yellow trousers, lime-green blouses and yellow skirts: students caught in the rain, racing for shelter. These teenagers, thrilled by the weather and by the excitement of running together, are laughing, but are inaudible through the heavy rain drumming on the car roof.¹⁷⁸

Glimpsed from a moving car and framed by its window, Cole's image expresses the instantaneity and fortuitous alignments of archetypal street photography. Textual description ticks off some of the basic criteria that generally lend interest to a visual image: a striking colour palette, contrast, drama. Bright uniforms stand out against an otherwise grey scene. Students are 'caught' at the moment of a soaking. As with a photograph, this image is a silent one: we see laughter, rather than hear it. The scene's silence, and the detachment that comes with viewing it through glass, lends it that further photographic quality: stillness.

Motivated by Cole's fiction's general interest in the visual arts, and by the analogy of narrator as camera, in this section I suggest that photography is the most revealing framework within which to consider aspects of Cole's description's aesthetic. As I mentioned in my introduction to this chapter, photography is a capacious medium. It borrows from, and reflects back at us, techniques taken from a host of other visual forms. Coming at Cole's descriptions from a photographic angle has much to tell us how this author works with light and with perspective. And it also has much to tell us about how a literary text might sustain certain theoretical discussions – discussions that attach more often to the visual image than they do to the literary one – as the image can be manipulated or given a different charge, either through lighting effect or the adoption of a particular viewpoint.

¹⁷⁸ Cole, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, p. 120.

The integration of the photograph within a literary text is a particular trend in contemporary literature. W. G. Sebald is the best-known proponent of the technique, but diverse authors deploy this photographic look.¹⁷⁹ Regardless of the specificities of its use, novelistic incorporation of photographs generally allows for a productive encounter between inset image and the surrounding text. Each can act as a commentary or critique on the other, by turns reinforcing or devaluing the message of its textual or visual counterpart. The wider effect is to make the literary text more of a visual thing, by putting the literal image to work in making meaning for the reader. Cole's own photographs of Lagos feature in *Every Day Is for the Thief*. This visual material carries an uncertain referentiality and has an unstable relationship to the text. Looking at Cole's novel, the reader can have no assurance of a correspondence in time and place between the inset image and its surrounding description. While the latter is a literary construct, the inset photograph is a real image that has been produced outside of this fictional context. What Cole is doing is here is repurposing photographic material to enhance and complicate the effect and status of his fictional text.

Aspects of Cole's description, in *Open City* as well as in *Every Day Is for the Thief*, show a similar repurposing. This is not a deployment of literal photographic material, but a borrowing from the visual medium's techniques and wider aesthetic. My study of Cole's work, then, progresses from the separation of a photographic aesthetic from its physical supports of camera, film, raw data etc. Proceeding from this I consider photography as it shows up in an atypical media form, that of the literary text. Art historical approaches appear increasingly amenable to theorizing this kind of cross-medial movement. In the wake of Modernism's formalist promotion of medium-specificity, a more fluid definition of the photographic object and practice is now generally accepted. Rapid technological advance demands a consideration of the form's 'multiplicity and malleability', writes Sabine T.

¹⁷⁹ See, for instance, W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011); Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Rearsby: W. F. Howes Ltd., 2006); Rachel Kushner, *The Flamethrowers: A Novel* (London: Harvill Secker, 2013); Ben Lerner, *10:04* (London: Granta Books, 2014).

Kriebel.¹⁸⁰ The belief that photography is a single medium is now a ‘conceptual limitation’, suggests Jan Baetens.¹⁸¹ Generally, however, the interest for such critics is in how photography interacts with its wider visual environment and with other visual media forms. The literary text rarely comes into it.

Diarmuid Costello, for instance, recasts the tenets of medium-specificity to reveal one such versatile understanding of the photographic medium. He reworks Michael Fried’s early criticism – the idea that a medium is determined by a given work’s conviction that it belongs to a certain grouping, over any material, causal, or ontological criteria – to produce some counter-intuitive categorizations. On Costello’s reading, ‘the photographer Jeff Wall emerges, albeit with certain important qualifications, as a ‘painter’ who paints photographically, and the painter Gerhard Richter emerges as a ‘photographer’ who makes photographs with the means of painting’.¹⁸² Costello traces what might be called Richter’s photographic aspirations. And he outlines how Wall’s images ‘share a conception of what it is to depict everyday life keyed, if not exclusively to painting, then certainly more to painting, photography, and cinema construed as a *pictorial continuum* than to photography clearly conceived as a discrete medium’.¹⁸³

But what happens if we add the contemporary novel to this conversation? As I see it, like Wall’s photographs, prose description can also borrow from, and think like, the images that make up its wider visual environment. This is not to suggest that a text that is open to, for instance, a photographic or a painterly reading need possess some kind of conviction with respect to its chosen model medium. Rather, if we are to articulate exactly how contemporary novels function as records of their wider visual environment then some loosening of medial categorizations is desirable. Making cinema or photography’s boundaries more porous allows us to find traces of these visual media in other non-photographic art forms. This allows me to place

¹⁸⁰ Sabine T. Kriebel, ‘Theories of Photography: A Short History’, in *Photography Theory*, ed. by James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 3-49 (p. 4).

¹⁸¹ Jan Baetens, ‘Conceptual Limitations of Our Reflection on Photography: The Question of Interdisciplinarity’ in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 53-73 (throughout this chapter).

¹⁸² Diarmuid Costello, ‘After Medium Specificity Chez Fried: Jeff Wall as a Painter; Gerhard Richter as a Photographer’ in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 75-89 (p. 76).

¹⁸³ Costello, ‘After Medium Specificity’, p. 80.

Cole's description itself on a 'pictorial continuum' with the visual arts, and with photography in particular.

Much of *Open City*'s description charts the appearance of the changing sky. Julius's glances upwards are a recurring motif throughout this novel. And they provide the grounds for a suffusion of colour through the text. The narrator documents, for instance, 'the colors of the sky at dusk, its powder blues, dirty blushes, and russets, all of which gradually gave way to deep shadow'.¹⁸⁴ He notes how the 'sky was now at its last light, and a trickle of blue, seen through the buildings to the west, was all that leaked through'.¹⁸⁵ And later, he considers how 'in daylight, with the sun pouring into the deep clefts formed by the sides of skyscrapers, the street's ominous character was tamed'.¹⁸⁶ Silhouettes contribute to this trope: 'Ahead of me was a great black building. The surface of its half-visible tower was matte, a light-absorbing black like that of cloth, and its sharp geometry made it look like a freestanding shadow or cardboard cutout'.¹⁸⁷

Cole's descriptive interest in greyscale and geometric forms provides two particular instances of prose relaying its wider visual environment. In his essay, 'Shadows in São Paulo', Cole writes of his 'obsession' with René Burri's 1960 photograph, *Men on a Rooftop*.¹⁸⁸ This black and white photograph shows four men on the rooftop of a skyscraper in São Paulo. The image is typical of Burri's city photography. Its interest is in the formal shapes that buildings, streets and figures make, rather than in the human story. Cole explains the image's abstract qualities by reference to Giacometti: 'Far below them, stark in black and white, are tramlines and cars, and tiny pedestrians so perfectly matched with their long shadows that they look like miniaturized sculptures by Giacometti'.¹⁸⁹

Open City's own description brings to mind the aesthetic of this and similar images. Like the photographs of René Burri or André Kertész, the novel picks out

¹⁸⁴ Cole, *Open City*, p. 5.

¹⁸⁵ Cole, *Open City*, p. 43.

¹⁸⁶ Cole, *Open City*, pp. 160-161.

¹⁸⁷ Cole, *Open City*, p. 52.

¹⁸⁸ Teju Cole, 'Shadows in São Paulo', in *Known and Strange Things* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), pp. 313-318 (p. 313); René Burri, *Men on a Rooftop*, 1960, photograph.

¹⁸⁹ Cole, 'Shadows in São Paulo', p. 313.

clean shapes and patterns from the cityscape, charting the effects of changing light over these forms.¹⁹⁰ Reading Burri's presence in *Open City*'s description need not depend on the knowledge that Cole himself has an interest in the photographer's work. The point is that Burri's abstract forms, as with the decisive moments of his mentor, Cartier-Bresson, are part of a wider visual vocabulary. Literary descriptions that explicitly acknowledge this broader framework, as Cole's do, reward a reading practice that brings past visual experience to bear on the text in hand.

While such descriptions want to create a striking and culturally relevant picture, they do not necessarily aim at fixing an object. In the same essay on Burri, Cole writes of his own attempts to recreate the photographer's iconic image. He moves from rooftop to rooftop in São Paulo, but still cannot see the image that Burri saw. Finally, changing his camera lens makes the view click into place. The conclusion that Cole draws is commonplace. 'The photographic image is a fiction', he writes, 'created by a combination of lenses, cameras, film, pixels, color (or its absence), time of day, season'.¹⁹¹ We know that the photographic image, much as it might present as a transfer off reality, is a manipulated and contingent one. And literary description clearly has a similar claim on artificiality. Unlike its visual equivalent, however, the latter is less obviously about the represented image's arbitrariness. It might, through various self-referential or meta-fictional techniques, point up its own status as representation. But it is less often concerned with the contingencies of visual experience qua visibility, outside of the literary context.

Reading Cole's fiction with photography in mind draws out fiction's capacity to sustain just such a discourse. The author's prose frequently charts how external conditions impact upon the takeaway picture. Viewed from different angles or in different lights, impressions of objects shift. A given image might solidify or disintegrate over the course of a passage. The cardboard cut-out skyscraper when 'seen more clearly, although still at some distance' appears no longer as two-dimensional. The image crystallizes, showing the building as 'veiled in a densely woven net'.¹⁹² This focusing and blurring of images clearly invokes photography. Overlaying the visual onto the literary in this way does not go against the grain of Cole's fiction. It is instead a considered theoretical move that brings visibility to bear

¹⁹⁰ See, for instance, André Kertész, *Landing Pigeon* (1960).

¹⁹¹ Cole, 'Shadows in São Paulo', p. 317.

¹⁹² Cole, *Open City*, p. 52.

on texts that consistently ask, with their surface allusions and perceptive narrators, to be considered in visual terms.

Viewing Martin Munkácsi's work at the International Center of Photography, two particular images catch Julius's eye. One, of boys running into the surf at Lake Tanganyika, is the image that prompted Henri Cartier-Bresson to develop his concept of the decisive moment. The other is Munkácsi's *A Field Full of Children* taken in Kissingen in 1929. The photograph, Julius notices, 'must have been taken from a zeppelin': 'bodies, filling every available space, made a flat, abstract pattern against the field'.¹⁹³ Munkácsi's images often depend on an aerial viewpoint or call upon abstraction, as do many of the photographs produced during this period. In the 1920s and 30s, photographers experimented with a range of new vantage points and unconventional, often abstract, forms.

László Moholy-Nagy promoted this shift in photographic technique as the medium's New Vision. According to Mology-Nagy, human vision is deficient. The camera, which can see its object more closely, more sharply, and at a range of angles, can make up for what the human eye lacks. 'Such scientific and technological advances almost amount to a psychological transformation of our vision', Moholy-Nagy explains, 'since the sharpness of the lens and its unerring accuracy have now trained our power of observation to a higher standard of visual perception than ever before'.¹⁹⁴ While the camera lens's 'unerring accuracy' is up for debate, the development of photography has changed how we see. The medium, as with all of those representational paradigms that precede it, organizes our visual field. Photography, as Silverman has outlined in detail, contributes significantly to that 'logic of images through which we figure objects and are in turn figured'.¹⁹⁵

Cole's narratives are closely representative of how photography determines contemporary viewing practice in the particular way that Moholy-Nagy suggests. The idea is that photography does not just see for us, it also teaches us how to see. Post-photography, human vision is enhanced; it takes on some of the abilities of its

¹⁹³ Cole, *Open City*, p. 153.

¹⁹⁴ László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947), pp. 206-207.

¹⁹⁵ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 196.

technological equivalent. Cole's own narrative approach sits comfortably within this technologically determinist understanding of photography's impact on the eye. As I outlined in my discussion of focalization, Cole's narrators show an enhanced vision. They are, in many ways, camera-like. But there is one further way in which Cole's narrators draw on photographic principles in order to enhance their looking. Principally, this comes down to the way in which they deploy various external technologies as an additional supplement to their vision; technologies that allow for the adoption of varied and interesting viewpoints.

To some extent, Cole's chosen narrative mode precludes the incorporation of diverse perspectives. While a third person account is flexible in its provision of a varied viewpoint, *Open City's* or *Every Day Is for the Thief's* first person positions are less so. These walking narratives mostly amount to an approximation of images seen by the wandering human eye. And so, following Munkácsi, Cole makes use of certain technologies and techniques to lend his work a range of visual aspects. Dominant among such techniques is the use of an aerial or elevated viewpoint. An observation of the sun 'pouring into the deep clefts formed by the sides of skyscrapers' is one of many instances in which Julius's vision operates on a vertical axis, throwing into relief the otherwise horizontal street-view narration.¹⁹⁶ These moments in which the narrator's eye is drawn 'all the way up to the tops of the four- and five-story buildings' build to impress a three-dimensional sense of the city. These departures from flânerie's typical street view expose Cole's fiction's interest in charting the visual experience of the city from all angles. Skyscrapers, birds, aeroplanes, and other aerial objects provide pretexts for glances upwards or views downwards, often in the mind's eye if not in reality.

Cole sets Julius up as an augur, a diviner of the sky or literally an observer of birds:

I used to look out the window like someone taking auspices, hoping to see the miracle of natural immigration. Each time I caught sight of geese swooping in formation across the sky, I wondered how our life might look from their perspective, and imagined that, were they ever to indulge in such speculation, the high-rises might seem to them like firs massed in a grove. Often, as I searched the sky, all I saw was rain, or the faint contrail of an airplane bisecting the window, and I doubted in some part of myself whether

¹⁹⁶ Cole, *Open City*, p. 160.

these birds, with their dark wings and throats, their pale bodies and tireless little hearts, really did exist.¹⁹⁷

A window frames the view. Even at a very localized level, prose narrative makes its description read as a series of images. There is the impression of city as forest. There is the formal, perhaps abstract, effect of a jet stream intersecting a windowpane. The passage is emblematic of the perspectival flexibility that we find throughout *Open City*. One moment Julius looks at the birds, the next he adopts their viewpoint.

Adoption of a bird's eye view, either in the imagination or through physical positioning, is a motif of Cole's descriptive practice. And a flight often serves to introduce these overhead perspectives. An aeroplane's descent in *Every Day Is for the Thief*, for instance, allows for a view over Lagos. As the aircraft 'drops gently and by degrees toward the earth, as if progressing down an unseen flight of stairs', the narrator's eye ranges over 'the low settlements outside the city' and the airport building with its 'shoddy white paint and endless rows of small windows'.¹⁹⁸ The aeroplane here works in both a material and a theoretical capacity. In the first instance, it is a simple prop that provides the reader with an alternative vantage point from which to view the landscape.

But it also goes further than this, as it serves to reiterate Cole's prose's affinity with photographic practice. This comes about principally through the association between flight and early aerial photography. Nadar took the first aerial photographs from a hot air balloon over Paris in 1858. And following this, various flying objects, including kites and pigeons, were put to use in imaging the landscape. While other forms of pictorial representation might have attempted to recreate such a viewpoint, camera technology in tandem with technologies of flight is our principle means of seeing as if from above. On account of this history, sights seen through an aeroplane window have an already photographic quality; we recognise their organization and content by reference to previously seen photographs.

Viewing as if from the view of a bird or a plane sits in clear opposition to the practice of *flânerie*, which relies predominantly on walking for its visual

¹⁹⁷ Cole, *Open City*, p. 4.

¹⁹⁸ Cole, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, p. 9.

information. And Cole's fiction's trope of a sky vantage point is not only anti-flânerie in orientation, but also in ideology. Michel de Certeau places the bird's eye view in direct contrast to the everyday practice of walking in the city. 'Seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center', de Certeau writes, offers a unified picture of the city below. It transforms the urban environment into 'a text that lies before one's eyes', allowing one to 'read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god'. Everyday walkers, by contrast, are immersed in their environments. They see in fragments, and remain themselves unseen; they are neither privy to nor part of a totalized image of the city.¹⁹⁹

Open City's own descriptive practice evokes and operates within both of these contrasting frameworks. Mostly, Julius as street photographer captures and relays snatches of the cityscape. The impression of New York that arises is piecemeal and yet more faithfully representative of the visual experience of urban wandering. When Julius's vantage point shifts upwards, however, his narrative offers a more unified view of the city. These panoptic vistas recall the look of aerial photographs and they are suited to a novel that, its title implies, construes the city as a text. *Open City* brings to mind Umberto Eco's *Open Work*. The parallel suggests that, as with de Certeau's New York when viewed from above, Cole's New York is 'a text that lies before one's eyes'.

De Certeau uses a metaphor of the image, as well as the text analogy, in explaining the difference between an elevated view of the city, and the reality of it as experienced at street level. He writes of how the 'panorama-city is a 'theoretical' (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices'.²⁰⁰ This equivalence between the theoretical and the visual affirms that cartography or aerial photography's belief in a total image of a city is essentially an act of visual projection.

Cole's description stages its own version of panorama as illusion. As Julius's plane lands into New York, the visual advantage that this gives the narrator is put to full use:

¹⁹⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 91-93.

²⁰⁰ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 93.

I was saddled with strange mental transpositions: that the plane was a coffin, that the city below was a vast graveyard with white marble and stone blocks of various heights and sizes. But as we broke through the clouds and the city in its true form suddenly appeared a thousand feet below us, the impression I had was not at all morbid. What I experienced was the unsettling feeling that I had had precisely this view of the city before, accompanied by the equally strong feeling that it had not been from the point of view of a plane.²⁰¹

Again, here a window organizes the view and an aeroplane flight provides the pretext for the image. The progress of the description effectively re-enacts the experience of landing into the city. First impressions and speculation as to what lies beneath the cloud layer sequentially give way to the view's 'true form'.

As the narrative progresses, however, it casts the presumed trueness of this form in a different light. The cause of Julius's déjà vu is revealed. 'I was remembering something I had seen about a year earlier', he explains, 'the sprawling scale model of the city that was kept at the Queens Museum of Art'.²⁰² The reference is to the museum's *Panorama of the City of New York*, built initially for the 1964 World's Fair. Now it is the model, rather than the reality, that makes a claim on true form: 'It showed, in impressive detail, with almost a million tiny buildings, and with bridges, parks, rivers, and architectural landmarks, the true form of the city'.²⁰³ The repetition of this key phrase sets the passage up as a comment on the relationship between an object and the representation of that object. Julius even refers to the classic example of this relationship. 'The attention to detail was so meticulous', he explains, 'that one could not help but think of Borges's cartographers, who, obsessed with accuracy, had made a map so large and so finely detailed that it matched the empire's scale on a ratio of one to one'.²⁰⁴

And reading Cole's allusion to Borges's cartographers, one cannot help but think in turn of Baudrillard's own reading of the allegory. Baudrillard uses it to introduce his commentary on the status of the real in postmodernity. Borges's one-to-one map, which blurs the distinction between reality and its representation, illustrates the second-order simulacra. In the third-order of simulacra, which defines the postmodern age, the imitation no longer refers back to an original: 'The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that

²⁰¹ Cole, *Open City*, p. 150.

²⁰² Cole, *Open City*, p. 150.

²⁰³ Cole, *Open City*, p. 150.

²⁰⁴ Cole, *Open City*, p. 150.

precedes the territory – *precession of simulacra* – that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map’.²⁰⁵ So too in Cole’s text, the difference between the original and its copy has collapsed.

While Cole’s fiction does engage with such discourses on the nature of representation, this is not the strand that I pursue in this instance. In the following section, I will pick up on this idea that images, and fallible memorial images in particular, can supplant reality. But for now, in drawing out the nuance of this particular passage, I simply want to stress that Cole’s narrator sees in pictures. Already seen representations code his perception of the world. The urban landscape takes on the character of black and white photography. A subway passenger looks like a subject for Velázquez. An aerial view of New York is indistinguishable from the architectural model. Filtered through the eyes of such a narrator, much of Cole’s description reads as a series of images, taken directly from a wider visual culture. A full appreciation of how Cole’s description works, and what its concerns are, depends then on bringing an awareness of these visual models, their contexts and their associations, to bear on the texts in hand.

²⁰⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 1.

1.4 Photographic Structures

I want to use this section to deepen our understanding of how a literary text might reflect and respond to the pictures that make up its wider visual environment, along with the issues that attach to those images. While my interest in the previous section was largely to do with Cole's prose's emulation of a photographic aesthetic, here I want to consider how the influence of certain visual, and specifically photographic, structures can be read from Cole's fiction. The move is from a consideration of surface, to an examination of the integral fabric of these texts. Frames and fragments are two structures that hold particular interest. These two concepts provide workable models for understanding the characteristic organization and temporality of Cole's narratives.

In the final readings of this section, my analysis then digs deeper again, as it considers how photography codes not just the look and the narrative organization of Cole's work, but also its themes. In particular, Cole's presentation of memory in *Open City* shows up well when interpreted from a photographic perspective. My aim is to make clear that novels engage with and articulate their wider visual environment not just on an aesthetic level, but also in theoretical and thematic terms. And I hope that such readings will prepare the way for the following two chapters, in which, although I do consider aesthetic issues, my discussion focuses more on the latter dimension.

Firstly, I want to consider what role the frame, as both a material device and a metaphorical concept, plays in Cole's work. I suggest that we label the frame as one of Mieke Bal's 'travelling concepts'. That is, the concept shows up differently, but also comparatively, across and within visual and textual representational forms. Reading framing devices in prose description from a visual perspective is a useful expository exercise. In the first instance, it can tell us how frames operate and what effects they produce within a literary context. But secondly, it points up the common ground between textual and visual representational spheres; both rely on particular organizational constructs, and they can sustain and support discussion on the same issues. And in this respect, the following reading as a whole is an appeal for a more integrated approach to thinking about literary and visual practices.

The frame is integral to photographic practice, and to its theorization. Writing on the photographic conditions of surrealism, Rosalind Krauss outlines some of the basic conditions of photography itself. Framing is photography's essential condition; Krauss names it 'that domain most inherently photographic'.²⁰⁶ The 'frame announces the camera's ability to find and isolate' its object, which in the case of surrealist photography is the erotic or strange within the everyday.²⁰⁷ Attending to a photograph's frame, therefore, focuses attention on how photography is essentially a process of quotation: the photographic image partitions off a detail from reality, offering it up as something to be viewed. The frame can 'simply be there, silently operating' in a given photograph or 'the frame can itself be glorified, represented', drawing attention to the cutting and cropping that makes the final image what it is.²⁰⁸

The latter is the case, Krauss writes, in much surrealist photography. Surrealist photography puts pressure on the frame so as to present an experience of reality as representation: 'what the camera frames and thereby makes visible is the automatic writing of the world: the constant, uninterrupted production of signs'.²⁰⁹ But compositional and conceptual emphasis on the frame is not at all exclusive to surrealism, nor even to photography. Windows, doorways, mirrors, and other structures act as frames-within-frames across art traditions. Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656), discussed so extensively by Michel Foucault in the introduction to *The Order of Things*, is well known example. For Foucault, the painting as a whole is remarkable for its self-awareness. And its various internal frames contribute this overall self-referentiality.²¹⁰

Photographic allusion to framing, however, has a force that surpasses its precedents in painting and other art forms. A photograph's stress on the frame is doubly self-referential, for it refers back to and reduplicates the originating technical frame of the camera lens. Drawing attention to the fact of the image's production in this way, photographic pressure on the frame is one of modern photography's most consistent tropes. Julie Blackmon, for instance, whose work shows a clear debt to the

²⁰⁶ Rosalind Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism', *October*, 19 (1981), 3-34 (p. 29).

²⁰⁷ Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism', p. 31.

²⁰⁸ Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism', p. 31.

²⁰⁹ Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism', p. 31.

²¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002); pp. 3-18.

look of seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting, puts the concept and construct of the frame to productive use throughout her work. As with the work of Jan Steen or Pieter de Hooch, much of Blackmon's images are domestic scenes, filled with children, dogs, and various household objects.

Blackmon's *Snow Day* (2008) is one such domestic interior. The use of light in this work clearly recalls Dutch interior painting, with windows used as sources of illumination. The main window is most notable, however, for its framing effect. In *Snow Day*'s foreground are a child and a dog. They are preparing for, or have just come inside from, the snow. This is the photograph's primary content. Inset into this main scene, there is another image. Through the door window on the back wall, the viewer sees a tableau of children playing in the snow. The effect of this inseting is to draw attention to the nature of photography qua medium, namely the photograph's stake in isolating and framing visual detail. Centralized and rectangular, *Snow Day*'s inset picture replicates the material particulars of the wider photograph that it occupies. Drawing attention to the physical frame in this way, as well as to the editorial act of framing that a photographer engages in when making such an image, *Snow Day* presents photographing as synonymous with framing.

Further details drive this reading. In the primary scene, a dog lead and glove strings run up to the edge of the main frame and disappear. The simple linearity and directionality of these objects turns them into pointers: they direct the viewer's eye beyond the frame. In accentuating the photograph's edge and implying a continuation of the scene beyond the given image, these details are a reminder of the processes of selection and composition that lie behind any given photograph.

Cole's prose is similarly keen to present image making as continuous with framing. 'It was early summer', Julius recalls, 'but the view was grim, a landscape of wire fences, parked cars, and disused construction equipment':

It was then that I saw Nadège's uneven walk. It was, in a sense, the first time I had really seen her: the slanting afternoon light, the vicious landscape of wire fencing and broken concrete, the bus like a resting beast, the way she moved her body in compensation for a malformation.²¹¹

Cole's prose outlines how compositional and editorial variables influence an overall impression. Various details prompt the reader to see Nadège as positioned within a

²¹¹ Cole, *Open City*, pp. 62-63.

certain frame. Landscape props and light slanting from an upper corner focus attention on her as the central figure. The rendering draws on a very photographic understanding of the image, its status as both a trace of a particular moment and as a creative depiction capable of producing meaning on its own terms. Frame operates here as a communicative, as well as a material, object: only when she is framed thus, does Julius fully perceive his girlfriend.

Frame-like structures continue to feature throughout Cole's descriptions, directing gazes and organizing content. As with Julie Blackmon's photograph, windows and doorways operate as found frames for Cole's photographer narrators. Views of Lagos in *Every Day Is for the Thief* largely reach the narrator, and the reader, through the window of a car or bus. Cole's use of a vehicle window to direct his description is keyed to a range of photographic precedents. Window-framed urban images bring to mind, in particular, images from Ed Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*.²¹² Several of these petrol station photographs appear to have been taken from a moving car. It is as if the image, fortuitously pre-composed by a window, comes to the photographer as a kind of ready made. *Every Day Is for the Thief*'s actual illustrations reiterate a correspondence between seeing through a window and seeing through a camera lens; six out of nineteen of Cole's inset photographs depict just such a view.²¹³

Riding on a Lagos danfo, Cole sees a 'woman in an *adire* blouse'.²¹⁴ Cole's view of the woman depends upon a window being opened: 'Someone pushes a window open and a cooling breeze curls around the bus. That is when I saw her'.²¹⁵ Description of this woman goes on to take up the entire following chapter. Here, Cole uses the simple convention of chapter division to full effect. Isolating the description from the surrounding narrative sets it up as a silent stand-alone image, with the final sentence of the preceding chapter, '[t]hat is when I saw her', representing the moment of capture. Only visual clues are offered about the figure, of whom we 'can only see scarf and shoulders'. Cole imagines speaking to her and speculates as to her backstory, but he keeps his distance as he gazes at the back of her head. The woman remains a closed off, 'mysterious', object of contemplation

²¹² Ed Ruscha, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (Alhambra: Cunningham Press, 1969).

²¹³ Cole, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, p. 2, pp. 12-13, p. 20, p. 40, p. 63, pp. 122-123.

²¹⁴ Cole, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, p. 41.

²¹⁵ Cole, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, p. 38.

and speculation.²¹⁶ The chapter's final sentences secure this reading of textual image as photograph: 'Just like that, she is gone. Gone, but seared into my mind still. That woman, evanescent as an image made with the lens wide open'.²¹⁷

A narrator's eye for readymade frames is clear in *Open City* too. The richly decorated and beautifully lit interior of a Brussels café fortuitously frames its occupants:

The other person in the café was a middle-aged tourist who, I noticed when I came in, was scrutinizing a map. In the small interior which was lit by the diffuse light from outside, she looked pallid, and her gray hair caught the light with a dull shine. The café was old, or had been done up to look old, with darkly polished wood lining its walls and several oil paintings in tarnished gold-leaf frames. The paintings were marine scenes, choppy seas on which quartermasters and merchant ships listed perilously.²¹⁸

Julius reads this scene as an image, and his attention to props and lighting effect asks that a reader do likewise. His description sets up a Vermeeresque representation by which external light illuminates a contemplative female figure. The scene in its entirety stretches before the reader, framed by the light from the window and the café walls. Maritime paintings, images within a wider image, give the scene further visual interest.

Throughout this novel, interiors play a substantial part in organizing description. A 'quiet, mote-filled shop', filled with 'an endless array of curious objects', offers up an image of a previous century: 'I felt as if I had stumbled into a kink in time and place', Julius explains.²¹⁹ Such interiors, with their generous lighting effects, present as already image-like. As with this scene in a 'dusty, sun-suffused shop', these views onto quiet and strikingly lit spaces often operate as stand-alone pieces. The narrator picks these images out from, or projects them onto, the everyday, and relays his findings to the reader. The result is a novel that reads as a series of vignettes.

²¹⁶ Cole, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, p. 42.

²¹⁷ Cole, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, p. 43.

²¹⁸ Cole, *Open City*, pp. 108-109.

²¹⁹ Cole, *Open City*, pp. 190-191.

From the outset, Cole implies that his narrative should be considered as such. ‘Lagos’, Cole writes, ‘is a city of Scheherazades’.²²⁰ And following this, he sets *Every Day Is for the Thief* up less as a novel, more as a chain of intersecting tales and images: ‘I was still a child when I learned to stitch the various vignettes into a single story’.²²¹ *Open City* has a similar investment in presenting narrative not as a coherent totality, but as a series of discrete instances: ‘We experience life as a continuity, and only after it falls away, after it becomes the past, do we see its discontinuities’.²²² Such moments suggest the relevance of vignette form, or the structure of the fragment, for Cole’s fiction. Photography, which starts out as an aesthetic point of reference for prose description, also becomes in these terms a generating principle for narrative form in Cole’s work.

Writing on how the medium accommodates fetishism, Christian Metz outlines the fragmentary status of the photograph. ‘Photography is cut inside the referent’, Metz writes, ‘it cuts off a piece of it, a fragment, a part object, for a long immobile travel of no return’.²²³ So the photograph takes a slice from reality, and then freezes it. To photograph something is to commit to an ‘act of cutting off a piece of space and time, of keeping it unchanged while the world around continues to change’.²²⁴ Images in Cole’s fiction have much in common with the photograph in this respect. As I have suggested, the narrative of the considered texts brings to mind flânerie or street photography. And, as an effect of this style, descriptive passages in Cole’s work typically register as a series of stitched together vignettes. The point is that sights reach the narrator, he briefly dwells on their surface value, and then the narrative moves on to the next sight.

The photograph is fragmentary on two counts. Firstly, as Metz sets out, it can be considered as such in so far as it is a segment of reality. Secondly, the photograph is fragmentary in the sense that it stands alone. Discontinuity characterises the photograph. ‘The character who is off-frame in a photograph’, Metz explains,

will never come into the frame, will never be heard – again a death, another form of death. The spectator has no empirical knowledge of the contents of

²²⁰ Cole, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, p. 27

²²¹ Cole, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, p. 59

²²² Cole, *Open City*, p. 155

²²³ Christian Metz, ‘Photography and Fetish’, *October*, 34 (1985), 81-90 (p. 84).

²²⁴ Metz, ‘Photography and Fetish’, p. 85.

the off-frame, but at the same time cannot help imagining some off-frame, hallucinating it, dreaming the shape of this emptiness. It is a projective off-frame (that of the cinema is more introjective), an immaterial, 'subtle' one, with no remaining print.²²⁵

This decontextualized aspect of the photograph also characterises many of the descriptive moments across Cole's fiction. Pictures appear before the narrator independent of any apparent backstory or origin. And they disappear as suddenly as they arrive, not to be referred to again:

He wears an off-white security guard's uniform and carries no weapon. When my aunt shakes her head, he shakes his head apologetically, smiles, and melts away. When we get to the car, a thin woman in a tattered *buba* and *iro* approaches us and says she wants some money for transportation. I don't see her approach, actually; she is just suddenly there, in front of me. She is small and looks ill.²²⁶

Much of *Every Day Is for the Thief*'s travel narrative reads as above, as a string of disconnected impressions set out before the narrator. The pattern that we see here, of images taking shape and then dissipating, regulates the description throughout. This aspect aligns Cole's literary images with photographic ones, as it sets them up as separate visual units. And much of the vocabulary used in these instances furthers this association. Melting, as used above, and similar terms throughout the author's work bring to mind focusing and blurring. Cole writes of how a man's features 'come together very slowly', or of how 'all of a sudden' a face 'resolved itself'.²²⁷

Keying literary images to the photographic in this way clearly affects Cole's texts at a local descriptive level. But it also exerts a wider structural influence over the author's work. Discreteness and isolation from a wider context organizes not just the visual content of the texts considered, but also the narrative information more broadly. In *Open City*, a process of free association determines the succession of the narrator's thoughts and, accordingly, much of the novel's content. Julius describes how he 'flitted from book to book', often lapsing into a kind of 'fugue'.²²⁸ This singularity of the mental percept is a fundamentally photographic conception of the image; it figures it as a discrete object, capable of being sorted, stored, considered in

²²⁵ Metz, 'Photography and Fetish', p. 87.

²²⁶ Cole, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, p. 16.

²²⁷ Cole, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, p. 89; Cole, *Open City*, p. 121.

²²⁸ Cole, *Open City*, p. 5.

sequence or individually. In this way, scraps of memories, images or previously read material make up the narrative, as Julius's mind 'race[s] around itself, remembering fragments of dreams or pieces of the book I had been reading'.²²⁹ The novel's different units of information seem disconnected, as they slot together in an apparently random manner.

A disregard for chronology furthers this sense of random disconnection. Images can stick in Cole's narrators' minds long after the initial exposure. Throughout the author's work, sights previously seen go on to colour subsequent experiences. Julius recalls how filmic 'images of people being shot and stuffed into car trunks, or decapitated and stored in freezers stayed with me'.²³⁰ A childhood image of a 'blind, wandering bard' with 'large yellow eyes, calcified to a gray color at the pupils' resurfaces years later, when looking at the paintings by John Brewster.²³¹ Visual impressions, conceived in photographic terms as distinct physical objects, are archived in the narrator's mind and recalled at will. And in this way, past images continue into the present.

This overlaying of past and present directs us to a further key facet of Cole's fiction's structural rapport with photographic representation: reading Cole's prose with an eye for traces of this visual medium, we uncover an inherently photographic quality to how time functions in this author's work. In *Open City* the narration slips mostly between the past and past continuous tenses:

There were five pairs of players now, under the nave aisle to the right in this evening scene, all of them black. On the other side of the hall, under the other long nave aisle, there was another pair of men, both white, playing chess. I walked among the backgammon players, most of whom seemed to be middle-aged, and their languid, focused faces and the slowness of their movements did nothing to correct my impression of being among life-size mannequins.²³²

Here, deployment of the present tense in conjunction with past continuous verb constructions lends an impression of presentness to the already happened. The effect

²²⁹ Cole, *Open City*, p. 6.

²³⁰ Cole, *Open City*, p. 29.

²³¹ Cole, *Open City*, pp. 37-38.

²³² Cole, *Open City*, p. 46-47

is photographic in its clearly realised presentation of the past for its continued consideration in the present. The eye can scan over these chess players at leisure. The description makes a point of stillness. Movements are slow. The players are frozen like ‘mannequins’. Effectively, the passage is a static representation: a ‘scene’.

Discussions regarding photographic time generally come down to the photographic image’s ability to freeze a given moment, its function as an ‘arrest of time’.²³³ Roland Barthes, for instance, writes of an ‘aorist’ photographic tense; that is, a temporal mode that lacks any capacity for duration or completion.²³⁴ Too heavy an emphasis on this one detail, however, throws up problems when it comes to reading literary time in photographic terms. The above scene from *Open City* is close to stilled. But it nevertheless describes continuous, albeit slow, movement. Although Cole’s narrative segues abruptly between such vignettes, they are not strictly discrete. While they might appear as such, an overall narrative structure does bind them.

The framework that Peter Wollen sets out in ‘Fire and Ice’ provides a solution. In this essay, Wollen outlines the commonplace that denotes stillness as crucial in distinguishing photography from other means of image making:

The aesthetic discussion of photography is dominated by the concept of time. Photographs appear as devices stopping time and preserving fragments of the past like flies in amber. Nowhere, of course, is this trend more evident than when still photography is compared with film. The natural, familiar metaphor is that photography is like a point, film like a line. Zeno’s paradox: the illusion of movement.²³⁵

Wollen loosens the rigid demarcation between photographic time and that of other comparable media. He writes of a photograph’s aspect, rather than its tense. This is a more accommodating approach than the traditional view that photography is a

²³³ ‘Time is the most often discussed aspect of photography. Almost every text concerned with theoretical aspects of photography mentions, in one way or another, its relationship with time. Frequently, photography is defined as an arrest of time.’ Hilde Van Gelder and Helen Westgeest, *Photography Theory in Historical Perspective: Case Studies from Contemporary Art* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 64.

²³⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 96.

²³⁵ Peter Wollen, ‘Fire and Ice’ in *The Cinematic*, ed. by David Company (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2007), pp. 108-113, (p. 108).

spatial, rather than a temporal art. Considering a photograph from the point of view of aspect, rather than trying to attribute a pre-existing tense to it, allows us to read it as signifying processes or events. Photographic images, on Wollen's terms, can imply action or narration depending on their context or sequence. And a single photograph can contain the compressed indication of a whole action – an action that starts, plays out, and finishes within the single moment expressed.

Such qualities provide the basis for a consideration of time in Cole's work as pitched to photographic representation. As discrete units, descriptive passages in the author's work are almost static in tone. But when read together, these vignettes also participate in a linear narrative. Wollen uses the example of Chris Marker's film *La Jetée*, which 'shows that still photographs, strung together in a chain, can carry a narrative as efficiently as moving pictures, given a shared dependence on a soundtrack'.²³⁶ The literary equivalent to this is a string of descriptive vignettes given cohesion by a shared dependence on a single narrative voice, as we find in Cole's fiction.

Cohesion here points to structural unity, rather than factual coherence at the level of story telling. This point leads this section's final reading, in which I consider how approaching a literary text from a visual media perspective can often tell us something about the thematic concerns of the text in question. Here we see how the operation of the photographic image becomes a revealing metaphor for one of *Open City*'s predominant themes – the unreliability, or the selectivity, of memory. As I mentioned in my introduction to this chapter, this novel pivots on a key revelation. Towards the end of *Open City*, the reader learns that, as a teenager, Julius raped a childhood friend. The narrative surrounding this event is cloudy. Moji accuses Julius. And, as is typical of Cole's style, the narrative then skips onwards, with Julius barely acknowledging the charge. Julius has forgotten, or repressed, the incident, and he continues to do so. Or perhaps Moji's allegation is a lie, although there is no apparent motive for this. Either way, the point is that this revelation casts the preceding narrative in a different light. In the first instance, it asserts Julius's status as an unreliable narrator. But, further to this, it positions the novel as a

²³⁶ Wollen, 'Fire and Ice', p. 112.

commentary on memory – on memory’s slipperiness, its susceptibility to manipulation or suppression.

Cole points up the thematic importance of the revelatory passage, prefacing it with the following aside:

And so, what does it mean, when, in someone else’s version, I am the villain? I am only too familiar with bad stories – badly imagined or badly told – because I hear them frequently from patients. I know the tells of those who blame others, those who are unable to see that they themselves, and not the others, are the common thread in all their bad relationships. There are characteristic tics that reveal the falsehood of such narratives.²³⁷

A stress on narrative sets this passage up as a metafictional one. It clearly states the novel’s investment in figuring out memory and the soundness of first-person storytelling.

Reading Cole’s prose with discourses of the visual image, and specifically the photographic image, in mind can reveal the full extent and complexity of *Open City*’s commentary on memory. This visual-verbal affinity primarily comes down to the novel’s account of how images can comprise, but also supplant, memory. Reading the novel with an eye for visibility and its bearing on memory, we realise that prior to the rape accusation, *Open City* does in fact alert its reader to inconsistencies in its narrator’s version of events. Julius’s recollection of his father’s burial, eighteen years previously, illustrates this well:

In that time, I had complicated the memory of the day, not with other burials, of which I had attended only a few, but with depictions of burials – El Greco’s *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, Courbet’s *Burial at Ornans* – so that the actual event had taken on the characteristics of those images, and in doing so had become faint and unreliable. I couldn’t be sure of the color of the earth, whether it really was the intense red clay I thought I remembered or whether I had taken the form of the priest’s surplice from El Greco’s painting, or Courbet’s. What I remembered as long, sorrowful faces might have been round, sorrowful faces.²³⁸

The passage brings to mind the description of the Queens Museum’s *Panorama of the City of New York*, in which Julius’s view over the city ‘seemed to be matching,

²³⁷ Cole, *Open City*, p. 243.

²³⁸ Cole, *Open City*, p. 228.

point for point my memory of the model'.²³⁹ Similarly, here, Cole is quick to point out his narrator's confusion between the present image and a remembered representation of one. The specifics of Cole's chosen comparative images in this example effectively expose the inaccuracy of Julius's recollection. El Greco's *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* and Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* differ greatly in style and composition. The implication is that the real event could not have looked concurrently like both. Instead, Julius apparently remembers a miscellany of visual styles and previously seen images.

El Greco's *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* is a highly stylized, mannerist depiction. The painting is organized on the vertical, with equal space granted to heaven and earth. Composed in tones of rich red and gold, it depicts an opulent ceremonial burial. By contrast, Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* is starkly realistic and unadorned. It is arranged horizontally, focusing viewer attention down towards the central dusty grave. Largely monochromatic, there is little colour variation, save for the priests' red robes. So Julius's visual reference points are highly contradictory, indicating the falsity of this particular recollection and suggesting more widely the role that diverse visual images can play in constructing and re-constructing experience. A reader that comes to Cole's text with the look of these images in mind is able to recognise the narrative's inconsistency.

This ability of the re-presented image to supplant an actual event is a quality that pertains more explicitly to the photograph, than to oil painting. Since its inception, photography has maintained a strong association with memory. Geoffrey Batchen, in outlining photography and remembrance's assumed mutuality, looks to the work of Julia Margaret Cameron for an early indication of the interrelation. Cameron entitled an 1868 albumen print of the Pre-Raphaelite painter Marie Spartali *Mnemosyne, or Memory*. 'It is a wistful and ethereal image, and a telling one', Batchen explains. 'For in naming this figure for the Greek goddess of memory and mother of the Muses, Cameron would seem to be suggesting that photography itself is an art of memory'.²⁴⁰

The affinities are clear. Photography has a material function in constructing, recording, and storing both collective identity and personal memory. In addition to

²³⁹ Cole, *Open City*, p. 151.

²⁴⁰ Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), p. 8.

its function as a physical archive, the medium also has a semiotic affinity with memory. Both medial forms are predominantly visual. They can focus either on a discrete event or be put to use in a processual manner. On account of such compatibilities, the form can be read as ‘fundamentally *constitutive* of remembering in the modern age’.²⁴¹ But the productivity of this interconnection, as Olga Shevchenko explains, remains contested: the ‘anxiety that technological innovations that pass as *aides-mémoire* might in fact threaten human capacity to remember is perhaps as old as technology itself’. And photography attracts this technophobic viewpoint perhaps in excess of any other imaging technology. The idea is that, in playing such a defining memorial role, a photograph might overwhelm or even prevent natural memory function.

Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* is firmly of this position, reading photography as a detriment rather than an aid to memory: ‘Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory (whose grammatical expression would be the perfect tense, whereas the tense of the Photograph is the aorist), but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes counter-memory’.²⁴² The problem with the photographic image is that it is over-determining. The impression that it leaves in the mind precludes imaginative input or subjective reassessment. ‘The Photograph is violent’, Barthes writes, ‘not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it *fills the sight by force*, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed’.²⁴³

Cole’s fiction’s presentation of the interaction between visual images and remembrance takes on the same attitude. When it comes to memory, images in the author’s work relay the violent force of Barthes’s photograph. Closely following on from the account of his father’s burial, the memory of a young girl’s death returns to Julius:

She came back to my mind only four or five years later, at my father’s funeral, at the graveside as the priest said prayers over his coffin, and I began to think in a general way about death. By then it was as though the little girl in the pale green school uniform, dead on a cool morning, a funereal

²⁴¹ Olga Shevchenko, *Double Exposure: Photography and Memory* (Pistacaway: Transaction Publishers, 2014), p. 6.

²⁴² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000), p. 91.

²⁴³ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 91.

morning, was something I had dreamed about, or heard in a telling by someone else.²⁴⁴

Julius claims to remember the incident's specifics, but admissions of memorial fallibility colour the surrounding narrative: 'dreamed about', 'memory fails me', 'I guessed', 'I don't remember'. The doubly mediated nature of the recollection – Julius communicates his remembrance of the event, rather than the event itself – lends it further improbability.

And yet, the account's visual detail is cogent. The girl was 'dressed in school uniform', a 'pale lime green dress', Julius specifies. She was 'a skinny girl, though not unhealthily so, merely gangly'.²⁴⁵ While the exact order or character of events is unknown, its aesthetic features persist. A surfeit of close visual detail across these pages means that the remembered image, in spite of its questionable authenticity, intrudes upon and determines the aesthetic of the narrative's description. This contradiction between the event's temporal distance and its visual immediacy recalls Barthes's complaint regarding the rigidity of photographically induced memory. So by troubling the visual parameters within which past experiences are recalled and related, such passages collectively call into question the authority of Julius's narration. And in this capacity, they prepare the ground for the novel's climactic plot revelation.

Closely reading Cole's description from a photographic perspective, then, shows us how the apparently ornamental colour and detail of a text's surface is in fact able to carry a heavy thematic weight. In the following, and final, section to my reading of Cole's fiction, I want to broaden this point. My aim is to set out how, as well as carrying themes internal to itself, novelistic description can also take on wider visual discourses and issues. Specifically, my interest is in what Cole's prose can tell us about the ethical and historical issues that attach to particular techniques and targets of visual representation. This sense of prose description's wider engagement with visual matters beyond its own borders is, as my chapters on Smith and Oyeyemi will set out, ultimately what is at stake here.

²⁴⁴ Cole, *Open City*, p. 226.

²⁴⁵ Cole, *Open City*, p. 225.

1.5 Opacity

As I have indicated throughout the discussion so far, the act of looking, as it is expressed in Cole's fiction, does not come without complications. Flânerie, a particularly visual way of experiencing the city, leads to largely superficial interaction with other city dwellers. The panoptic viewpoint, as in aerial views from an aeroplane or the panorama from a skyscraper, is a projective way of viewing the city. Memorial images, instantiated either in photographs or in the mind, can supplant true memory by force. This suggests where we might tackle more directly some of these issues that attach to visibility. In this respect, aspects of the discussion will anticipate arguments to come in my readings of Smith's and Oyeyemi's work. In all three cases, I am concerned with what literary fiction can tell us about the advantages and limitations of privileging visibility as the key modality for being in, experiencing, and representing the world.

Here, as in the two chapters to come, the immediate question is how an ethical reading of visual representation and interaction might work. I read the contemporary novel as able to sustain a didactic role in this respect. Aside from this general understanding of the novel as in dialogue with visual representation at an ethical level, there are also some more specific points of intersection between the present discussion and the readings still to come. The fiction of my three chosen authors, for instance, puts forward a strategy of invisibility as a way of negotiating a potentially limiting or oppressive visual representational framework. I also touch on the question of intersubjectivity, proposing that Cole's, Smith's, and Oyeyemi's novels all consider it to be a key criterion for achieving an ethical visual relation to the world and others. While Smith's and Oyeyemi's fiction will directly show us what such a relation might look like, Cole's work achieves the same end by drawing out its alternatives. Essentially, while intersubjectivity might be the goal, Cole's fiction shows us what happens when this element is lacking.

The following passage from *Open City* indicates Cole's description's investment in reviewing the ethical dimensions of visual representation. Specifically, as with most of the present chapter, the concern here is what literary description can tell us about the look and concerns of photography. Julius comes across the aftermath of a demonstration. 'The heart of the city', it appeared to him, 'was gripped by what seemed to be a commotion from an earlier time':

There was some kind of scuffle some two hundred yards down the street, again strangely noiseless, and a huddled knot of men opened up to reveal two brawlers being separated and pulled away from their fight. What I saw next gave me a fright: in the farther distance, beyond the listless crowd, the body of a lynched man dangling from a tree. The figure was slender, dressed from head to toe in black, reflecting no light. It soon resolved itself, however, into a less ominous thing: dark canvas sheeting on a construction scaffold, twirling in the wind.²⁴⁶

Here, Julius's vision calls on the logic of the afterimage. His impression of a hanging body works as a kind of visual recall by association. Detecting violence in the recently dispersed scene – a 'police barrier lay on its side' – Julius carries this violence forward to transpose it onto the sight of the twirling canvas sheeting. The image that he transposes onto it is one of a lynched man. While Julius may not have witnessed such a sight first-hand, the transposition is nevertheless best understood in terms of memory. That is, Julius draws on a wider cultural memory, specifically a collective visual memory, and in this way brings past images to bear on the scene at hand.

The specific visual context within which the above passage registers is that of the photographic representation of lynchings, in particular the post-civil war lynchings of African American men, and sometimes women, in the American South. The gathered crowd of men and the demonstration's violent undertones bring these historical events to Julius's mind. In basic terms, we can think of this passage as an expression of the American city's continued capacity to sustain racial violence, and the associated anxiety that this causes Cole's protagonist. But my point is more targeted than this, as I want to draw out how the above description comments specifically on how visual representation disseminates violence.

To consider the history of lynching in post-civil war America is necessarily also to consider how images can function as both records and tools of violence. Lynching, as Amy Louise Wood sets out, derived its power from its inherently spectacular nature. The act is, 'by its very nature, public and visually sensational'.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ Cole, *Open City*, pp. 74-75.

²⁴⁷ Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 1.

These murders relied on visual strategies both for their immediate effect and their wider impact:

They were often deliberately performative and ritualized, as if mobs expected their violence to be noticed. They were then frequently made public – even spectacular – through displays of lynched bodies and souvenirs, as well as through representations of violence that circulated long after the lynchings themselves were over: photographs and other visual imagery, ballads and songs, news accounts and lurid narratives.²⁴⁸

The considered passage from *Open City* supports Wood's suggestion that lynching is an act that plays out in fundamentally visual terms. Importantly, Julius's recall of a lynched man is predicated on an image. It is the colour and movement of the canvas sheeting that affords this contemporary literary description access to the historical act. Prose fiction, in this capacity, shows us how a wider image repertoire conditions the contemporary viewer's way of seeing. Julius projects an image taken from the cultural image stock onto the present scene. And the description itself reflects this fact internally, as its own descriptive choices aim at bringing certain iconic images, selected from the wider visual environment, to its reader's mind.

The images that do come to mind, as with much of Cole's description, are most likely to be photographic ones. Wood outlines how, in making use of the visual sphere for its organization and dissemination, lynching relied above all on photographic technologies. 'Representations of lynching in photographs and motion pictures', she writes, 're-created the spectacle itself'. These forms 'not only replicated, in starkly visual terms, the ideological force of prolynching rhetoric but also literally projected images that substantiated that rhetoric and allowed it to be continually reimagined'.²⁴⁹ At the time, photographs were taken at lynchings and sold as souvenirs. These images circulated widely, often on postcards. And the photograph remains the modern viewer's primary access to event. So when a hanging black figure seems somehow familiar, as it does for Julius and for a reader of Cole's description, it is because such an image has been already viewed in photographic form. The novel makes this clear; Julius, walking past the stall of a

²⁴⁸ Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, p. 2.

²⁴⁹ Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, p. 9.

sidewalk salesman in Harlem earlier in the novel sees ‘displayed enlarged photographs of early-twentieth-century lynchings of African-Americans’.²⁵⁰

So further to outlining how lynching did and still does appeal predominantly to the eye, this passage from *Open City* also comments more specifically on the role that photographic representation plays in this violent and racialized arena. The point is that certain forms of representation cannot be viewed in a vacuum. In this instance, photography carries with it the trace of its past deployment in recording and publicizing acts of violence. This is not to say that the medium as a whole is somehow compromised. Photographs also played a significant, and successful, role in the antilynching movement. As Amy Louise Wood explains, the ‘same images that had constructed and reinforced white supremacy came to have an alternative symbolic power, one that gave vitality and strength to the antilynching movement’.²⁵¹ I simply want to stress that both single images and entire representational forms are charged with associations, and carry the memory of the past uses.

Julius’s vision of lynching as my introductory example points to a wider anxiety that runs throughout *Open City* and the author’s other writings, both fiction and non-fiction. And it also anticipates a similar anxiety running throughout Oyeyemi’s work. This anxiety is directed at the shortcomings of visuality when it comes to representing – and, as is often the case, reiterating – racial difference. As outlined, Cole’s novels’ general interest in photography and their perceptive narrators make for prose description, and a reading experience, that is highly attentive to the look of things. But such an approach, Cole’s fiction suggests, should not be put to use indiscriminately. And so the author’s work outlines how, when it comes to race in particular, it might be better to resist prioritizing visual information.

Open City sets out its argument for such a resistance. Scenes that point up the uneasy relationship between race and visual representation run as a motif throughout the novel:

The little boy wore an imitation peasant’s hat. They had been mimicking slanted eyes and exaggerated bows before they came to where I was. They now both turned to me. Are you a gangster? They both flashed gang signs, or their idea of gang signs. I looked at them. It was midnight, and I didn’t feel

²⁵⁰ Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, p. 18.

²⁵¹ Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, p. 4.

like giving public lectures. He's black, said the girl, but he's not dressed like a gangster. I bet he's a gangster, her brother said.²⁵²

This short interaction tells its reader two things. Firstly, it stresses that in attributing race, outward appearance is determinative: the small girl bases her assessment on Julius's skin colour. Secondly, the passage points up such an assessment's ready recourse to stereotype. Here, two clichés feature in quick succession. In both instances, the tags rely on outward characteristics, such as 'slanted eyes' or 'gangster' dress.

This passage's content and organization directly follow that of Frantz Fanon's 'Look, a Negro!' moment. This passage from *Black Skin, White Masks* tells of how the white gaze continually marks and dissects the black body. As with the passage from *Open City*, it is a child who interpellates Fanon in this way: 'Look, a Negro', she says, 'Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened'.²⁵³ This process of epidermalization, the inscription of race onto the skin, is a violent act. 'What else could it be for me but an amputation', asks Fanon, 'an excision, a haemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?'.²⁵⁴ Most importantly, it is also a visual act. As Mary Ann Doane, reading Fanon, outlines: 'Wherever the black goes, his or her identity is immediately given as a function of the most visible organ – the skin'.²⁵⁵ So for Fanon, looking is the key site and tool of racial subjectification.

In alluding to race theory's primal scene in this way, Cole promotes his own novel as a comment on the black body's overdetermination. The scene in question introduces a strand of racial critique that goes on to run throughout *Open City*. We read of 'the way the black Africans' in Tangier 'moved around, under constant police surveillance'.²⁵⁶ And Julius outlines how his 'skin colour, one of the intensifiers of my sense of being different' sets him apart in both Nigeria and America.²⁵⁷ Or, in Brussels, Julius feels that his 'presentation – the dark, unsmiling,

²⁵² Cole, *Open City*, p. 31-32.

²⁵³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p. 112.

²⁵⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 112.

²⁵⁵ Mary Ann Doane, 'Dark Continents: Epistemologies of Racial and Sexual Difference in Psychoanalysis and the Cinema', in *Visual Culture: The Reader*, ed. by Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, 2005), pp. 448-456, (p. 453).

²⁵⁶ Cole, *Open City*, p. 67.

²⁵⁷ Cole, *Open City*, p. 78

solitary stranger – made me a target for the inchoate rage of the defenders of Vlaanderen’.²⁵⁸ Taken collectively, these isolated scenes and comments establish the black man who walks in the city as an object to be viewed, often with suspicion. And Julius remains constantly aware of his status as such.

As is the case in both Smith’s and Oyeyemi’s fiction, a contradiction inheres within Cole’s literary treatment of visuality. In the work of these authors, we find that visual prioritization at a practical level is very often pitted against a suspicion of visual representation at a thematic level. Far from constituting an uncomplicated promotion of visually motivated expression, contemporary novels strive to draw out the nuances, and limitations, of such an approach. The rationale for this tension is didacticism. Through emulating the arrangement and techniques of visual media, a literary text sets up an effective representational framework within which to examine exactly how such media achieve their effect. In my discussion of Smith’s fiction, I will set out how invisibility functions in her work as a counterpoint to visual representation’s perceived shortcomings. The suggestion is that, given the visual image’s leaning to essentialism or stereotype, total withdrawal from the visual field might present as an enticing alternative. And the literary image, which is less determined than its visual equivalent, makes for a fitting site on which to test out such a strategy.

Cole’s work similarly takes invisibility into consideration within its otherwise hypervisual descriptive framework. In his essay ‘A True Picture of Black Skin’, Cole discusses Roy DeCarava’s photograph of a young woman on a freedom march in Mississippi in 1963. What is remarkable about this image, Cole writes, is its darkness:

The power of this picture is in the loveliness of its dark areas. His work was, in fact, an exploration of just how much could be seen in the shadowed parts of a photograph, or how much could be imagined into those shadows. He resisted being too explicit in his work, a reticence that expresses itself in his choice of subjects as well as in the way he presented them.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁸ Cole, *Open City*, p. 106

²⁵⁹ Cole, ‘A True Picture of Black Skin’, in *Known and Strange Things*, by Teju Cole, pp. 144-151, (p. 145).

The darkness of DeCarava's photographs is both literal and figurative. His images draw out the potential of different shades of black and grey: 'even the white of the shirts have been pulled down, into a range of soft, dreamy grays'.²⁶⁰ And they make an allowance for hiddenness, as they 'all share a visual grammar of decorous mystery'.²⁶¹ In this sense, DeCarava's black and white photographs serve as 'visual stories about the hard-won, worth-keeping reticence of black life itself'.²⁶²

Cole reads DeCarava's work as a counterbalance to a history of representation that prefers lightness. Photography, in particular, is marked by such a preference. Writing of how all 'technology arises out of specific social circumstances', Cole explains how 'cameras and the mechanical tools of photography have rarely made it easy to photograph black skin'.²⁶³ The use of Shirley cards, light metres that tend to underexpose black skin, and webcams that cannot recognise black faces are all 'reminders that photographic technology is neither value-free nor ethically neutral'.²⁶⁴

So a photographer who wants to develop an ethical photographic practice must negotiate both the medium's technical bias, and its associations with past violence. Taking his lead from the look of DeCarava's work, Cole proposes a solution. The solution is to develop a new visual vocabulary, one that actively engages with, and so recasts, opacity. This generous approach does not impose an agenda of transparency onto a subject, but rather allows darkness to reach its full potential, as it does in DeCarava's work:

Instead of trying to brighten blackness, he went against expectation and darkened it further. What is dark is neither blank nor empty. It is in fact full of wise light, which, with patient seeing, can open out into glories.²⁶⁵

In articulating this theory, Cole borrows from Édouard Glissant's work on opacity. For Glissant, opacity is 'the right to obscurity'.²⁶⁶ It is also the right to

²⁶⁰ Cole, 'A True Picture of Black Skin', p. 147.

²⁶¹ Cole, 'A True Picture of Black Skin', p. 145.

²⁶² Cole, 'A True Picture of Black Skin', pp. 150-151.

²⁶³ Cole, 'A True Picture of Black Skin', p. 146.

²⁶⁴ Cole, 'A True Picture of Black Skin', p. 146.

²⁶⁵ Cole, 'A True Picture of Black Skin', p. 147.

²⁶⁶ Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), p. 2.

remain inscrutable to others. The concept has particular applicability when it comes to interpersonal relations, especially in a (post-)colonial context:

I thus am able to conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity for him. To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to 'make' him in my image. These projects of transmutation – without metempsychosis – have resulted from the worst pretensions and the greatest of magnanimities on the part of the West.²⁶⁷

Glissant argues for an individual's right to stay inaccessible within a wider culture that privileges transparency. As he sees it, transparency is reductive. Remaining misunderstood is therefore preferable to being laid bare in front of, and so reduced by, the gaze of others. On these counts, Glissant's theory intersects with Peggy Phelan's account of invisibility in her study of the political dimension of performance. As I will outline in detail in relation to Smith's novels, Phelan proposes invisibility as a highly productive modality for political empowerment. Like Glissant, Phelan argues for a reconsideration of the value that we attribute to visibility, as she aims to 'construct a way of knowing which does not take the surveillance of an object, visible or otherwise, as its chief aim'.²⁶⁸

The ideas of both writers can effectively be brought to bear on Cole's work. Following DeCarava, expressions of impenetrability recur throughout Cole's own photographs. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, his most recent collection, comprised of both short texts and photographs, is entitled *Blind Spot*. And the images contained within duly attend to the blind spots in the visual, and cognitive, field. Cole crops in such a way that a given subject's purpose or context remains in doubt. His camera seeks out that which is shadowed and indistinct, but makes no attempt to make these dim spots accessible. Backs are turned in the majority of those images that contain human figures. Cole's photographic practice is not invested in revealing the world; it simply aims at capturing, and refusing to account for, its opaqueness.

²⁶⁷ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), p. 193.

²⁶⁸ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 1-2.

The same can be said of passages of Cole's prose. As outlined earlier, a preference for monochrome and a heavy use of shadowing characterises the author's description. This effect, when taken together with his texts' more explicit thematic investigations into opacity, begins to look like more than just an aesthetic choice. Cole's narratorial gaze is a penetrating one, but it consistently gives full due to that which remains hidden. Throughout *Every Day Is for the Thief* and *Open City* we find concessions to unknowability. Faces, while subject to great visual detailing, remain for the most part unreadable. Cole's narrators repeatedly scrutinise these surfaces, but fail to find what ought to be inscribed there. 'I look at Mrs. Agelaja again', recalls *Every Day Is for the Thief*'s narrator, 'this woman in whose radiance I can see nothing that looks like grief'.²⁶⁹ Lightness here, far from bringing insight, fails to carry meaning. Similarly, in *Open City*, Julius watches a group of young Rwandans, whose 'quiet faces surely masked some pain' that he is unable to see.²⁷⁰ Revelation, as these examples argue, does not necessarily follow on from representation.

With further respect to Glissant, characters in Cole's fiction remain hidden from themselves, as well as from others. Admissions of psychological inaccessibility in particular bear this out. Julius, 'swaddled in a private darkness', rarely looks inward.²⁷¹ Blurriness is a cipher for depression; this state can be 'described as looking out across a river on a day of heavy rain'.²⁷² And Julius analogises human psychology more widely as a 'blind spot so broad that it had taken over most of the eye'.²⁷³ The mind, in sum, 'is opaque to itself'.²⁷⁴ In these examples, darkness plays a figurative role, recalling the way in which DeCarava's photographs deploy literal shades of black and grey as a correlative for mystery.

A trope of blindness, running throughout *Open City*, further tests out Glissant's premise. Although its own descriptive approach generally privileges visuality, the novel does pause to consider alternatives. It stages two protracted meditations on the merits of blindness. The first contemplates 'the many romantic ideas attached to blindness'. It considers how lack of sight is often thought of as an entryway to 'unusual sensitivity and genius', and to 'the gifts of memory and

²⁶⁹ Cole, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, p. 47.

²⁷⁰ Cole, *Open City*, p. 139

²⁷¹ Cole, *Open City*, p. 17

²⁷² Cole, *Open City*, p. 26

²⁷³ Cole, *Open City*, p. 239

²⁷⁴ Cole, *Open City*, p. 238

prophecy'.²⁷⁵ The second discussion centres on 'what Paul de Man says about insight and blindness'.²⁷⁶ De Man reverses the value typically applied to each term. He suggests that the former, *Open City* tells us, 'can actually obscure other things, that [it] can be a blindness'. And the reverse also holds, the idea that 'what seems blind can open up possibilities'.²⁷⁷

Reading back through *Open City* with these discussions in mind allows us to recast Cole's narrator's characteristic disengagement in more generous terms. It is too much of a stretch to read Julius's refusal of sympathy for those who explicitly ask for his help in such terms; generally, this narrator is 'in no mood for people who try to lay claims' on him.²⁷⁸ Nor can we find much of the positive in the detachment with which he receives his rape allegation. Both instances point up the dangers of taking disengagement to its fullest extent. But when it comes to his general mode of experiencing and describing the city and its inhabitants, we do find space for an ethical reading. Julius's distanced outlook, when read with Glissant's views on opacity in mind, registers less as a lack of ethical commitment and more as a general respect for the unknowability of others. Given Julius's camera-like ability to seek out and relay meticulous visual detail, the way in which he nevertheless grants certain subjects their reticence stands out.

The next chapter turns to Silverman's explanation of how we tend to 'experience every visual "augmentation" as an unconscionable colonization or subordination'.²⁷⁹ And such a view is representative of a long tradition of scepticism as to the merits of visual representation. I will set out how for Silverman, as for Smith's fiction, the solution is to create a visual environment within which a multiplicity of images and looks can flourish. In this way, subjects are not fixed by a single essentialist gaze, but rather are brought into being from multiple vantage points. Cole's fiction stops short of establishing such a viewing environment. In *Every Day Is for the Thief* and *Open City*, the descriptive gaze is largely a consistent one. Its distanced view upon the world operates within a single, camera-like modality.

²⁷⁵ Cole, *Open City*, p. 37.

²⁷⁶ Cole, *Open City*, p. 127.

²⁷⁷ Cole, *Open City*, p. 127.

²⁷⁸ Cole, *Open City*, p. 40.

²⁷⁹ Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 19.

Aware of its own limitations in this respect, the narratorial eye in Cole's fiction does not try to account for all that it sees. While it dwells on visual surface, it nevertheless allows its subjects to remain closed-off:

In the midst of this cornucopia sat an old woman, who, having looked up briefly when I came in, was now fully reabsorbed in her Chinese newspaper, preserving a hermetic air that, it was easy to believe, hadn't been disturbed since horses drank water from the troughs outside.²⁸⁰

As with much of the description in Cole's work, here the given image has a quality of stillness. The woman appears frozen in time and space. Most important, however, is her hermetic air. Cole uses this adjective throughout *Open City*, attaching it most often to human figures. The point is that looking at a given subject is not akin to accessing it. As with his photographs in *Blind Spot*, Cole's prose description does not aim to illuminate a given subject, but rather to preserve its opacity.

In further support of such a reading, we can look back to the gallery scene discussed at the very beginning of this chapter. What fascinates Julius most about John Brewster's paintings is, as with the reading woman above, their 'air of hermeticism'.²⁸¹ 'Brewster hadn't resorted to indirect gazes or chiaroscuro to communicate the silence of the world', Julius observes. The depicted 'faces were well lit and frontal, and yet they were quiet'.²⁸² So it seems that Cole's fiction's idea of a productive visual economy is one in which looking and representing stops short of trying to explain all. There is no assumption here that knowing should automatically follow on from looking.

In sum, Cole's work offers up, and represents, a theory of visual representation. His flâneur narrators pick out detail as a photographer might, drawing attention to subtle lighting effect as well as to the blind spots beyond the frame. Literary description, on these terms, does not want simply to describe, but rather to show the mechanisms by which such a representation comes about. Through consistent allusion to another representational form, it points up its own reliance on cropping, selection, contrast,

²⁸⁰ Cole, *Open City*, pp. 190-192.

²⁸¹ Cole, *Open City*, p. 37.

²⁸² Cole, *Open City*, p. 38.

and other such formal choices. Acting as a mirror for photography in this way, the text both tells us how photography works, and it claims its own status as a visual thing. An appreciation for visual images and devices is key in grasping the look of a particular scene, or the workings of a narrator's memory. These superficial and structural conversations between verbal and visual representation lay the ground for a thematic investigation into how the latter works. Specifically, Cole's work is concerned with how particular visual forms might be compromised by their past associations, and it sketches out a part-solution.

Throughout Cole's fiction, there are moments when the narrative lapses into art commentary. As with his fiction's museum scenes, these set pieces target visual art and its reception. By way of conclusion, I look to one such aside. Again, here Cole's interest is in the relationship between race and visual representation:

The classic anti-immigrant view, which saw them as enemies competing for scarce resources, was converging with a renewed fear of Islam. When Jan van Eyck depicted himself in a large red turban in the 1430s, he had testified to the multiculturalism of fifteenth-century Ghent, that the stranger was nothing unusual. Turks, Arabs, Russians: all had been part of the visual vocabulary of the time.²⁸³

This passage draws together various aspects of Cole's prose's conversation with visibility. Its wider point is that an image's cultural setting, as much as its formal features, determines its meaning. And it stresses that the image is, in turn, always a reflection of that setting. Visibility, on these terms, is not a restrictive modality per se. Rather, it is how the image is deployed and received, and the framework within which it operates, that matters.

Secondly, we can take Cole's term 'visual vocabulary' as general support for this study's main premise. My argument is that looking, and so too reading, do not take place in a visual vacuum. The reception of both visual and textual imagery is to large extent determined by a range of previously seen images, along with their cultural associations. Cole's work gives full credit to this fact. Both in this above passage and throughout, his narratives acknowledge that any given representation registers in and reflects a wider visual context. Sustained and active engagement with this image stock, and in particular photographic images, motivates Cole's own

²⁸³ Cole, *Open City*, p. 106.

descriptions. In response to this, a reader must in turn bring his or her own experience of such a stock to bear on the text in hand. Reading, recast in this way, figures as a visual activity, as much as a literary one.

2.1 The Novel as Fresco

Optical instruments appear throughout Ali Smith's fiction. In *How to Be Both* George considers the 'flickers and shadows' of Super 8 footage that she has transferred to her 'laptop and phone'.²⁸⁴ She takes pictures of the double helix structure on her 'phone camera'.²⁸⁵ She watches pornography on her iPad.²⁸⁶ *The Accidental* shows a similar interest in visual technology, and with Astrid's camcorder in particular. Much of Astrid's experience is filtered through this device. The opening to her narrative stresses the extent to which she views life through this lens: 'she could get up and go and film the vandalism'; 'she picks up her camera, turns it over in her hand'; 'she films all the way round Katrina then films her own feet going down the rest of the stairs'.²⁸⁷

Smith's sustained focus on such devices anchors her fiction in its late twentieth and early twenty-first-century setting and provides it with interesting narrative tropes and patterns. But most importantly, it draws attention to the act of looking itself and promotes vision as the contemporary's dominant experiential mode. These apparatuses provide Smith with the opportunity to outline different modes of looking in detail – to consider not just what is seen, but how it is seen. They allow for the observation, for instance, that 'seeing a picture like one of Palmer's is very different from seeing something atrocious on a screen'.²⁸⁸ And they provide a basis for Magnus's explanation of how 'something on a film is different from something in real life':

In a film there is always a reason. If there is an empty room in a film it would be for a reason they were showing you the empty room. Magnus held up a pen then dropped it. He said if you drop a pen out of your hand in real life, that's all it is, a pen you dropped out of your hand there on the ground. But if someone in a film drops a pen and the camera shows you the pen, then that

²⁸⁴ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 209.

²⁸⁵ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 358.

²⁸⁶ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 218.

²⁸⁷ Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 10, p. 13, p. 17.

²⁸⁸ Smith, *There but for the*, p. 167.

pen that gets dropped is more important than if it's a dropped pen in real life.²⁸⁹

The passage is a metafictional comment on narrative construction. As with a film's dropped pen, literary description is an artificially selective mode. Whereas in real life the eye falls on objects arbitrarily, a film or novel picks out select details for the viewer or reader. Of more interest to this study, however, is the passage's conversancy with filmic composition. It shows Smith's characters to be at ease with visual representation's workings and implications: Magnus understands and fluently articulates the relation between cinematographic technique and a film's meaning.²⁹⁰

Smith's fiction's dialogue with visual representation plays out on a technical plane, as well as a thematic one. As this study will set out in detail, Smith relays visual features or modes of looking through the very fabric of her texts – their semantic, structural and figural choices. The author prepares the ground for this by proposing some basic similarities between literary composition and other art forms. *How to Be Both*, for instance, implies a fundamental kinship between prose and painting. Francescho, a resurrected fifteenth-century fresco painter, repeatedly draws on Leon Battista Alberti's *De Pictura* when theorizing her art:

the great Alberti says that when we paint the dead, the dead man should be dead in every part of him all the way to the toe and finger nails, which are both living and dead at once: he says that when we paint the alive the alive must be alive to the very smallest part, each hair on the head or the arm of an alive person being itself alive: painting, Alberti says, is a kind of opposite to death.²⁹¹

²⁸⁹ Ali Smith, *The Accidental*, pp. 29-30.

²⁹⁰ Noël Carroll and Jinhee Choi summarize the charge that objects and actions carry in film, as in other art forms: 'In a play, we think that everything we are shown is of pressing importance – everything is there for a reason. Recall Scribe's law: the gun that appears in the first act goes off in the third (just as no character appears who will not, sooner or later, add something to the action). Likewise, we take it that every object in a painting has a contribution to make to the whole. The sense of importance and urgency that everything we see in film acquires does not seem different in kind from comparable feelings of immediacy derivable from theater and painting, i.e., from other visual arts'; 'Introduction to Part II', in *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures: An Anthology*, ed. by Noël Carroll and Jinhee Choi (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 51-66 (p. 59).

²⁹¹ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 157.

The reference is to a fifteenth-century treatise on painting technique, yet the observations might equally apply to the novel in hand. Both engage in resurrection. Smith hauls a little-known Renaissance artist into the twenty-first century, just as a painter breathes life into a subject:

Alberti it is who teaches too, how to build a body from nothing but bones: so that the process of drawing and painting outwits death and you draw, as he says, any animal by isolating each bone of the animal, and on to this adding muscle, and then clothing it all with its flesh: and this giving of muscle and flesh to bones is what in its essence the act of painting anything is.²⁹²

Smith's explicit comparison between the composition of a novel and fresco form cements our sense of a correspondence between prose and painting. She explains:

You have the very first version of the fresco underneath the skin, as it were, of the real fresco. There's a fresco on the wall: there it is, you and I look at it, we see it right in front of us; underneath that there's another version of the story and it may or may not be connected to the surface. And they're both in front of our eyes, but you can only see one, or you see one first. So it's about the understory. I have a feeling that all stories travel with an understory.²⁹³

For Smith, the affinity between novelistic and painting practice is structural and fundamental: 'the form of each functions 'as an open window through which the historia is observed'.²⁹⁴

Taking my cue from Smith's own willingness to trace a correspondence between the literary text and other forms of expression, I read her fiction from a visual arts perspective. The point is to show how the contemporary novel uses aspects of visual representational forms as a template for literary description. In so doing the novel both reflects, and participates in, its wider visual environment. The concerns and

²⁹² Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 157.

²⁹³ Ali Smith interviewed by Alex Clark, *Guardian*, 6 September 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/06/ali-smith-interview-how-to-be-both>> [accessed 22 March 2017].

²⁹⁴ Alberti, Leon Battista, *Leon Battista Alberti: On Painting: A New Translation and Critical Edition*, ed. and trans. by Rocco Sinisgalli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 39.

techniques associated with portraiture provide a starting point for my discussion. And my focus throughout is on the nature of character description and interaction in the author's work. My analysis of Smith's prose's technical interest in the visual image then leads on to a thematic consideration of visibility's role in the author's work. I suggest that Smith's novels propose certain strategies as correctives to the likely harms associated with a hyper-visual cultural environment. Both disappearance from the visual field and renewed attention to it are strategies of this kind. I show how the latter carries an ethical weight, with close looking serving as a basis for intersubjectivity.

Throughout, I position contemporary literature as a comment on visual representation. In making this claim, I borrow from Kaja Silverman's attribution of didacticism to certain forms of representation. For Silverman, pictures and films figure 'less as objects which I interpret from a position of greater theoretical knowledge, than as guides which, like Socrates' Diotima, have instructed me in the arts of love and productive looking'.²⁹⁵ Her analysis of Ulrike Ottinger's *Ticket of No Return*, for example, shows how film can provide 'a visual and narrative specification of the dangers of self-idealization'.²⁹⁶ Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*, meanwhile, 'effects a renegotiation of the relation between the Western self, and the African and Asian other'.²⁹⁷ It does so by dramatizing and manipulating the workings of memory, essentially encouraging its viewer to remember others' memories. And in so doing it 'radically revises what it means to look at Japan and Africa, and engages the Western viewer in an exemplary self-estrangement'.²⁹⁸

I suggest that literary description can similarly instruct in the workings of vision. The novel has a part to play in teaching us how to see critically, and how to pay close attention. To understand textual representation in this way is less immediately intuitive than Silverman's comparison of visual with visual. But Silverman's understanding of photography or film's expository value is itself very much keyed towards language. As Mieke Bal notes in her review of Silverman's work, *The Threshold of the Visible World* deploys a distinctive kind of

²⁹⁵ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 5.

²⁹⁶ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 45; *Bildnis einer Trinkerin (Ticket of No Return)*, dir. by Ulrike Ottinger (Basis-Film-Verleih GmbH, 1979).

²⁹⁷ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 185; *Sans Soleil*, dir. by Chris Marker (Argos Films, 1983).

²⁹⁸ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 186.

interdisciplinarity. Bal outlines how Silverman has developed a unique visual semiotic. It is one that takes its cue not from iconicity, as is typically the case, but from deixis. That is, it incorporates a sense of proximity, proprioception and the somatic into its understanding of language and the individual subject.²⁹⁹

This is part of a wider attempt to repair psychoanalysis's typical severing of mind from body. And so it places seeing and touching, thinking and articulating on a scale, rather than in oppositional relation. The internal workings of Silverman's text reiterate this accord between the visual and the verbal. Visual and linguistic modes of expression figure as metaphoric or revelatory of one another. As such, both explanatory technique and wider message reiterate 'the deep commonality between linguistic and visual 'expression' and representation' that Bal sees as characteristic of Silverman's approach.³⁰⁰

We find this commonality between the visual and the verbal expressed on the surfaces of Smith's novels. The author's interest in fresco form, or her prose's emulation of cinematography can be read as such. If literary description has an affinity with the techniques of visual representation, then it follows that it can also bear on lived visual experience, as Silverman claims cinema or photography can. And with this in mind, I attribute the same didactic weight to Smith's descriptions that *The Threshold of the Visible World* affords to actual images.

²⁹⁹ Mieke Bal, review of Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (1996), 'Looking at Love: an Ethics of Vision', *Diacritics*, 27.1 (1997), 59-72.

³⁰⁰ Bal, 'Looking at Love', p. 68.

2.2 Portraiture

The pop artist Pauline Boty recurs throughout *Autumn*. Smith interleaves her story of contemporary Britain with details from Boty's life and descriptions of Boty's paintings. The sight of some red flowers, and a house with brightly painted words, prompts Elisabeth to think of one of Boty's images:

The painting by Pauline Boty comes into her head, the one called *With Love to Jean-Paul Belmondo*. Maybe there's something in it whether she's got a job or not, something about the use of colour as language, the natural use of colour alongside the aesthetic use, the wild joyful brightness painted on the front of that house in a dire time, alongside the action of a painting like that one by Boty, in which a two-dimensional self is crowned with sensual colour, surrounded by orange and green and red so pure it's like they've come straight out of the tube on to the canvas, and not just by colour but by notional petals, the deep genital looking rose formation all over the hat on the head of the image of Belmondo as if to press him richly under at the same time as raise him richly up.

The cow parsley. The painted flowers. Boty's sheer unadulterated reds in the re-image-ing of the image. Put it together and what have you got? Anything useful?³⁰¹

This ekphrasis of the remembered image is meditative, impressionistic. It is concerned with the wider significance of Boty's chosen technique and arrangement, as much as with outlining the specific look of this painting. Does Boty's re-appropriation of Belmondo's image achieve 'anything useful?' Elisabeth wonders.

Boty died young and so never achieved the status of her male contemporaries, who included Peter Blake, Richard Hamilton, and David Hockney. Sue Tate, in one of the few studies of the artist, describes how Boty was 'marginalised, if not excluded, from both the mainstream histories of Pop and feminist art history'.³⁰² Tate aims to reassert the importance of Boty's contribution to British Pop Art, as does Smith in *Autumn*. Boty's 'vibrant paintings and collages' gave 'expression to a female subjectivity, expanding and enriching what was a very male genre', Tate explains.³⁰³ Boty's critiques of consumer culture and advertising,

³⁰¹ Smith, *Autumn*, pp. 138-139.

³⁰² Sue Tate, *Pauline Boty: Pop Artist and Woman* (Wolverhampton: Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 2013) p. 8.

³⁰³ Tate, *Pauline Boty*, p. 8.

her emphatic representations of female sexuality are all presented from a ‘resolutely female perspective’.³⁰⁴

Smith’s above description of Boty’s 1962 painting, *With Love to Jean-Paul Belmondo*, hints at Boty’s art’s distinctive and (proto-)feminist qualities. An exuberant crown of rose petals, seemingly quickly painted and uncontainable, connotes female genitalia. The film star is both pressed ‘richly under’ and raised ‘richly up’ by this crown. The ambiguous dynamic places Belmondo in a position more typically occupied by the female film icon. He is simultaneously held up by fame and idolization, and suppressed by the viewer’s gaze. The difference here is that the gaze is a female one: ‘Boty reverses the usual sexual economy of Pop to turn her lustful gaze on the male object of desire’.³⁰⁵

In its most standard iteration, Boty’s chosen representational framework for this image – the portrait – is a conservative genre: it works with the basic premise that outward form can shed some light on the character or status of a depicted individual. But Boty works within the confines of this form in order to unsettle them. The arrangement of a three-quarter head view and just-glimpsed shoulders is a typical orientation. Dark sunglasses, however, pull the viewer up short. The eyes in this image offer no window onto the sitter’s soul: this is less an intimate depiction of an individual, and more an emblem of generic stardom. Outward public image works to conceal the person depicted.

Boty’s subversion of art historical convention is a knowing one. In a photograph taken by Lewis Morley, Boty poses naked with *With Love to Jean-Paul Belmondo*. She lies in front of the painting, her pose imitating that of François Boucher’s depiction of Louis XV’s mistress, Marie Louise O’Murphy. In ‘posing with her own picture of her own object of desire’, Tate explains, Boty ‘collapsed the usual gendered object/subject, artist/model positions and occupied the identity of the sexually energetic artist that had been the prerogative of men’.³⁰⁶ So this is not a wholesale rejection of Western portraiture’s long-established conventions, but rather a reworking of them. Boty’s complication of typical gender roles derives its power from alluding to a clear visual symbol of female objectification – that of the reclining odalisque.

³⁰⁴ Tate, *Pauline Boty*, p. 10.

³⁰⁵ Tate, *Pauline Boty*, p. 77.

³⁰⁶ Tate, *Pauline Boty*, p. 78.

Much of Smith's character description shows a similar reliance on the emulation and adaptation of pre-existing representational conventions. In reading for visuality in Smith's work, I am struck by her description's closeness to the look and concerns of visual portraiture. Like Boty, Smith is interested in outward appearance's ability both to conceal and reveal. And like Boty, Smith reworks visual precedents to her own ends, making women into active gazers and choreographers of their own appearances. Taking my cue from such affinities, I use portraiture as an organizing framework within which to set out some of the main features of character description in Smith's work. In outlining these features, I prepare the way for subsequent analyses of how Smith's character descriptions divulge, and even drive, much of the thematic content of her work.

Smith's description's congruity with the tradition of visual portraiture is clear throughout her work. Characters come with visual correlates: images serve to define or identify. Amber, or Alhambra, in *The Accidental* is the most pronounced example of this. This character is literally conceived in a cinema, and then figuratively conceived out of cinematic associations. The effect is to depersonalize her identity and to figure others through a lens. Her basis in visual media is so entrenched that she takes on the characteristics of these forms: she functions as 'an exotic fixative'; she is 'light itself'.³⁰⁷ And, in turn, her gaze overexposes Michael, turning him into 'a Lee Miller / Man Ray solarization'.³⁰⁸ Amber's identity is not just built on visuality: it *is* visuality.

We find similar tendencies in *How to Be Both*. The trope turns less on a single character, but is just as sustained. George comes to understand herself by recourse to an assembly of visual media. She is 'generous and sardonic' like a del Cossa fresco.³⁰⁹ Throughout the narrative she reconstructs her past with Super 8 footage and photo collage. And a friend, Helena, describes how George looks like Sylvie Vartan in a 1960s photograph.³¹⁰ Smith's choice of comparisons is instructive. Fresco, film footage, and photographs are emphatically visual artefacts:

³⁰⁷ Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 163, p. 165.

³⁰⁸ Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 165.

³⁰⁹ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 240.

³¹⁰ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 268.

Smith's characters are visual constructs, built from a series of images as well as personality traits.

A similarly vision-based approach dominates characters' constructions of identity in *Like*. Kate finds her lookalike on a postcard: 'it does look like them, like Amy (dark hair) pushing Kate (light hair) on one of the swings'.³¹¹ The repetition of 'like' in quick succession, along with the details of 'dark' and 'light' in emphatically balanced parentheses, stresses that Kate's identification with the image is based on an unambiguous, and specifically visual, similitude. Smith uses simile a lot in this novel. And often, as with the example above, the device takes outward appearance as its point of comparison. Description of Pompeian plaster casts is one such example: 'His hair has fallen back off his foreheads. He looks like he is asleep'; 'His face is split in agony. He looks like he is smiling'.³¹² The first sentence of each pair describes how each plaster cast looks. Smith then introduces two visual similes, with the use of 'looks like' reiterating how these comparisons pivot on visual appearance.

'Like' occurs with striking frequency throughout the novel, outside of its technical function within similes.³¹³ In many of these instances, the preposition continues to operate in terms of visual comparison or contrast. Kate's contemplation of a diary exemplifies this:

She thinks about how there is a book in that box that isn't like all the other books. The writing inside it is different, it is a bit more difficult to read. The cover isn't hard or coloured like the others. It isn't beautiful on the outside like they are.³¹⁴

The difference between the two books is based on visual contrast: Kate concentrates on the look of the writing, the physical attributes of the cover, and its aesthetic value.

The extended use of 'like' in Smith's novel, both within similes and in isolation, is very simply an extended stylistic riff on the novel's title. But this contiguity also hints at a larger representational and cognitive framework, one that holds relevance for Smith's oeuvre as a whole. That is, *Like*'s title and its internal

³¹¹ Smith, *Like*, p. 6.

³¹² Smith, *Like*, p. 109.

³¹³ For a more detailed study into the 'uses and significances of the word 'like' in Ali Smith's first novel' see Ian Blyth, 'Simile and Similarity in Ali Smith's *Like*', in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 23-34.

³¹⁴ Smith, *Like*, p. 140.

stylistic promotion of the preposition coincide with Smith's description's overall tendency to refine character identity by means of visual likeness or dissimilitude. Discrete instances of visual comparison – George and Sylvie Vartan, for instance – support this impression.

So from the outset we see that characterization in Smith's work has some affinity with visualization. Smith tells us emphatically what her characters do and do not look like. She builds her characters from a catalogue of visual images, often images taken from a wider media culture. This is prose description as a kind of collage. And the intent is apparently to promote a reader's ready visualization of these characters: if we know what Sylvie Vartan looks like, then we can picture George.³¹⁵ A wider visual awareness must be brought to bear on the text. Reading Smith's descriptive techniques through the lens of visual portraiture will draw out the intermedial and remediating quality of Smith's prose. More importantly, it provides an original outlook on her novels' dominant thematic narratives: identity, gender, and the ethics of looking.

I call on theories of actual, rather than emulated and textual, visual representations to parse the specific quality of Smith's character presentation. While the coupling of literature and portraiture is already an established trope, the association generally circles around ideas to do with the 'literary portrait'. In its most expansive capacity, the term is taken to mean a biographical work in its entirety. Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady* and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* are well known examples.³¹⁶ The term can also be applied to inset, isolated instances of literary description that 'delineate character via external appearance'.³¹⁷ It figures as 'a portrait drawn in words – one in which the writer consciously introduces his character by way of exterior description in order to suggest or reveal inner qualities'.³¹⁸ My own focus will be less with how words present appearance as an index of inner life, and more with how Smith's prose

³¹⁵ There is a picture of Françoise Hardy and Sylvie Vartan on the front cover of the first edition of the novel. It appears to be the same photograph as that mentioned in the text.

³¹⁶ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (London: Macmillan, 1881); James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1916).

³¹⁷ E. Heier, 'The Literary Portrait as a Device of Characterization', *Neophilologus*, 60.3 (1976), 321-333 (p. 321).

³¹⁸ Heier, 'The Literary Portrait', p. 321.

engages with modern and contemporary portraiture's investment in problematizing any such correlation.

The similarity between literary and pictorial portraits extends beyond a shared focus on external appearance. Literary characterization can develop in tandem with trends in visual portraiture and, as such, appear coded by the rhetoric of this other visual form. It is in this sense that I approach the portraitive qualities of Smith's work: I take the portrait as a wider representational paradigm, as well as a particular form or device. As E. Heier notes, prose can register the influence of such a paradigm in diverse ways. He reads a parallel artistic and literary progression from the sparser aesthetic of early medieval portraiture to the 'highly sophisticated portraiture with distinct features during the Renaissance'. Similarly, the 'flowering of realistic portraiture painting in the nineteenth century' can be seen to translate into the literary descriptions of the time'. And 'when the technique of abstraction finally became fashionable among modern painters this kind of portraiture (although skilfully drawn with only a characteristic line or two) also became a fad in literature'.³¹⁹

These easily drawn analogies suggest that there is something about the organization of both written and visual character description that permits them to be read in similar terms, to attract a shared terminology. Loose historical parallels like Heier's reveal little regarding the extent to which one medium influenced the other, whether the written or pictorial relationship was causal or merely reflective. But perhaps this does not matter. Regardless of the direction of influence, such similarities nevertheless represent a coincident mirroring of wider cultural zeitgeists. Literary description's engagement with aspects of portraiture is, on this reading, simply one way in which prose registers its contemporary image repertoire.

Smith's prose makes a strong case for prose description's ability to take on some of the attributes and concerns of visual portraits. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's seminal separation of poetry and painting relied primarily on the assumption that writing is linear and takes time, while visual expression is spatial and relies on stasis. Such a separation should exclude words from producing portraits. But both writers and

³¹⁹ Heier, 'The Literary Portrait', p. 322.

artists suggest how the divide might be broached, or at the very least questioned. Janice Krasnow's portraits show words rather than faces. The artist paints descriptions of her subject, one to three lines of black paint on a light grey background. Krasnow is emphatic that these works are images – specifically, that they are portraits.³²⁰ One reads simply 'flawless yellow skin' (*Portrait Series I, Image 22*). Krasnow's framing of her images, both literal and conceptual, is everything. Lines of black paint occupy the centre of the blank space. These look like they should be exhibited as pictures, and so they are. Text achieves the status of visual portraits.

Smith's characterizations do not go so far as to claim image status. But they do cite visual portraiture as a representational model. In *Autumn*, Smith includes the young Elisabeth's '**Portrait in words of our next door neighbour**'. Smith makes clear that this portrait is 'in words'. And the ensuing 'portrait' is of a discursive, rather than a particularly imagistic, nature. The description starts by noting that the neighbour is 'most elegant' and 'not old', but then it digresses: Elisabeth explains, 'mother will not let me ask him the questions about being a neighbour that I am meant to be asking him for the portrait in words project'. So this is a portrait that depicts its subject only obliquely. Unable to interview Daniel directly, Elisabeth imagines such an encounter: 'I would ask him 1 what is it like to have neighbours 2 what is it like to be a neighbour'.³²¹

But in spite of having no direct visual access to the subject depicted, the description asks to be understood in terms of portraiture. Firstly, as with Krasnow's work, this is a question of framing. The label ('**Portrait in words of our next door neighbour**') introduces the description, announcing it as a portrait. An underlined bold typeface brings out text's literal visuality.³²² This direct appeal to the eye reminds the reader that 'portrait' is originally a visual art form. And it goes further in this reminder. Its typographic differentiation, set above and standing out from the rest of the description, references the look and purpose of a museum caption.

³²⁰ See Barry Schwabsky, 'In Person: Painting Portraits With Words', *The New York Times*, 18 July 1999 < <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/07/18/nyregion/in-person-painting-portraits-with-words.html> > [accessed 9 March 2017].

³²¹ Smith, *Autumn*, p. 231.

³²² The first phrase or sentence of each chapter in *Autumn* is typically in bold. But this example is unique in its underlining.

Approaching the passage with visual representation in mind also helps to account for its relationship to the rest of the novel. Smith gives Elisabeth's description, which is less than a page long, its own chapter. And two pages of blank space separate it from the previous one. The effect is to slow the reading process, to provide a pause. The chapter's aim is not to drive the narrative's progression, but to encourage the extended consideration of a single item: Elisabeth's word portrait. The description has an atemporal quality: it is an artefact from some unspecified point in the past. As such it seems to occupy a different narrative space to its neighbouring chapters, with their specific dates: 'a sunny Friday evening more than a decade ago, in the spring of 2004'; 'next morning in 2016'.³²³ Such evidence of stillness within a literary narrative goes some way towards querying any strict division of verbal and visual description along temporal versus spatial lines. And the same applies to character description in general, regardless of whether or not it is explicitly offered as a word portrait.

Inset instances of character description still and distil physical appearance and expression. As with the visual equivalent, their purpose is to isolate and to frame. And a reliance on the look of things, either overall aesthetic or particular detail, determines the effect. An example from *Like* shows prose description's ability to re-present the stillness of a visual image:

Her grandmother's mouth is open and she is making a noise in her throat. If Kate stands on her tiptoes she can see her top teeth. They are very white. Catriona's granny has false teeth that she can push out with her tongue. These teeth look like they're still real. Kate's grandmother has lines round the sides of her eyes and a line across her forehead above the top of her nose, as if someone drew it there. Her eyelids are twitching like her eyes are moving behind them.³²⁴

Here, sleep figures as a device to lessen movement. It captures Kate's grandmother for Kate and, correlatively, for the reader. The subject's stasis allows for a sustained visual appraisal by the viewer: Kate's tiptoeing to improve the view emulates for the reader the movement of a scanning gaze, working over the scene to register individual detail. Kate's grandmother's inaction, her essential absence from the scene, permits an assessment that is wholly based on appearance – uninfluenced by

³²³ Smith, *Autumn*, p. 223, p. 233.

³²⁴ Smith, *Like*, p. 87.

voice, behaviour, etc. Teeth are registered by how they ‘look’; we attend to their whiteness. As with *Like*’s wider preference for visual simile, a repeated ‘like’ and ‘as if’ stress how conclusions are drawn from observable detail. The portraitive mode of the passage is not limited to its focus on exterior. Rather, the very language of visual representation codes the description. The phrase ‘as if someone drew it there’ explicitly points up the parallel. An attention to ‘lines’, invoking the internal composition of drawing or painting, further contributes to the analogy.

This scene represents Kate’s first sustained encounter with her grandmother. As yet, they have not spoken; Kate’s grandmother has been referred to only as ‘Amy’s mother’ or ‘the lady’.³²⁵ So this descriptive passage stands in for a character introduction. And in this respect it represents many of the first meetings and impressions throughout Smith’s fiction. It is representative in that it privileges the registering of another’s physical appearance over a more sustained interaction. This is not to say that an attention to superficial detail does not yield an understanding of personality or character, but rather that any such understanding must stem from an initial visual impression.

In *How to Be Both*, Smith uses Francescho’s profession of fresco painter as a device to colour textual description with painting’s phraseology. A blackbird’s beak is a ‘good Naples yellow’; a prostitute’s make-up is a painting; ‘clothes are mosaic gold and azurite’; a maid’s complexion displays a range of pigments, ‘bianco sangiovanni, cinabrese, verde-terra, rossetta’.³²⁶ This borrowing of vocabulary from visual representation to apply to novelistic scenes and objects represents a lexical, literal way in which prose can point up its dialogue with the visual arts. But Francescho’s intricate visual detailing also achieves a more immediate impact by operating as a kind of perceptive paradigm within which the reader might experience these descriptions. Through Francescho’s eyes, we become sensitized to the composition, tones, and textures of literary scenes. We realize that the colour of a fictional beak might come in Naples yellow or Orpiment.

Take, for instance, Francescho’s first view of George’s face:

What I see for the first time is his face.

³²⁵ Smith, *Like*, pp. 60-61.

³²⁶ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 45, p. 79, p. 101, p. 13.

Most I see that round his eyes is the blackness of sadness (burnt peachstone smudged in the curve of the bone at both sides of the top of the nose).

It is as if he is a miniver that's been dipped in shadow.

Then I see that he looks very girl.³²⁷

The analysis proceeds visually: under-eye shadows equate to sadness; gender is constructed on observation, not a priori. As with previous examples, the vocabulary is predominantly that of the visual arts: burnt peach stones were used as drawing coals during the Renaissance; 'miniver' is a symbolic fur more common to painted portraits than to literary ones. By coding her description in these terms, Smith urges her reader to approach literary characterization with receptivity towards the look of things.

Another example from the novel further suggests that first impressions, for Smith's characters, are generally visual impressions. This extract comes from the beginning of Francescho's narrative. At this early point, Francescho and the reader have only had brief glimpses of George. Francescho's attention switches from a consideration of painting technique to an assessment of the other character, with the switch coming at 'his back'.

though I do like, I did like
a fine piece of cloth
and the way the fall of a ribboned bit off a shirt
or sleeve will twist as it falls
and how the faintest lightest nearly not-there
charcoal line can conjure a sprig that splits open
a rock
and I like a nice bold curve in a line, his back has a curve at the shoulder: a
sadness?³²⁸

Again, Francescho's painterly way of seeing and articulating urges Smith's reader to give thought to the visual. The passage attends to the aesthetically pleasing and more widely informative force of particular visual details: a scrap of fabric, the drape of a sleeve, a slight shadow, or the curvature of a line. This in itself creates a general impression of seeing as facilitative of comprehension or feeling in Smith's work. But most important for the present discussion is the repetition of the final

³²⁷ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 49.

³²⁸ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 6.

detail: the curve. There is a slippage between the lending of attention and importance to the curve of a painted composition, and the curve of George's shoulder. The coincidence asserts that both may be considered in the same terms, and that the visual effect of each is commensurate.

This detail cements our sense of Smith's characterization's association with aspects of visual portraiture. Firstly, the passage demonstrates the usual extrapolation of information from visible detail: a curve is parsed as sadness. Secondly, the shared terminology of painted composition and literary characterization reiterates the essentially visual basis of this extrapolation: the 'charcoal line' and 'bold curve' of the former, and the curved back of the latter. This contiguity emphasizes how assessment of another's emotion calls on the same interpretative structures as those directed at visual art. The difficulty of differentiating the above passage's description of painting technique from its portrayal of a person stresses this contiguity. Sparse punctuation, fragmented lines and lack of a linear thought process mean that without significant concentration, the descriptions merge. Such details point up an affinity between descriptions of people and descriptions of artworks in Smith's fiction, an affinity that effectively promotes each mode as reflective upon and comparable to the other.

With the exception of portraits painted to commission, much of twentieth and twenty-first century portraiture invokes the genre's conventions in order to problematize them. In addition to the straightforward technical similarities outlined above, it is this kind of engagement with the form that I understand aspects of Smith's prose to replicate. Complicating ideas of reference and intention are two strategies by which contemporary art reinvents the category of portraiture. An impression of referentiality is fundamental to calling an image a portrait. The form assumes a link between the art object and the individual depicted: 'an intended relationship between the portrait image and the human original'.³²⁹ And the portrait's allusion to its original need not rest on the recognition of its viewer. Rather it inheres in and is essential to the work itself.

³²⁹ Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), p. 7.

Hans-Georg Gadamer explains this attribute in terms of the portrait's occasionality:

Occasionality means that their meaning and contents are determined by the occasion for which they are intended, so that they contain more than they would without this occasion. Hence the portrait is related to the man represented, a relation that is not just dragged in but is expressly intended in the representation itself and indeed makes it a portrait. The important thing is that this occasionality belongs to the work's own claim and is not something forced on it by its interpreter.³³⁰

So the portrait is a work that announces its representation of a specific individual: 'there resides in the picture an undetermined but still fundamentally determinable reference to something, which constitutes its significance'. Whether or not a viewer recognises the portrayed individual is insignificant: 'alluding to a particular original is part of a work's own claim to meaning. It is not, then, left to the observer's whim to decide whether or not a work has such occasional elements. A portrait really *is* a portrait, and does not become one just through and for those who recognize the person portrayed'.³³¹ Robert Rauschenberg's contribution to an exhibition of portraits held at the Iris Clert Gallery in Paris in 1966 plays with portraiture's occasionality, its ability to self define: the artist simply sent a telegram to the gallery, with the message 'This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so'.³³²

Contemporary portraiture engages with portraiture's traditional need to refer to something in order to produce new, striking versions of the form. Felix Gonzalez-Torres's 1991 work *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, for instance, introduces a linguistic element into the usual image-referring-to-individual formula. This portrait is in fact an installation piece: a pile of roughly eighty kilograms of sweets, each individually wrapped in multicolour cellophane. The work is a visual pun. The sweets denote what Gonzalez-Torres understands to be his late partner's defining

³³⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, rev. 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2004) p. 144.

³³¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 146.

³³² Kathleen Merrill Campagnolo, and others, 'This is a Portrait If I Say So: Identity in American Art, 1912 to Today', in *This is a Portrait If I Say So: Identity in American Art, 1912 to Today*, eds. by Kathleen Merrill Campagnolo, Anne Collins Goodyear, and Jonathan Frederick Walz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 1-10.

quality: sweetness. So the image first refers to language (literal sweets symbolize figurative sweetness) in order to refer finally to Ross himself.

Gonzalez-Torres's installation complicates the idea of portraiture's referentiality in one further respect. Viewers are encouraged to take sweets from this pile, meaning that the pile slowly diminishes over the course of its display. Again, a symbolic element is at work: the shrinking piece represents how Ross's body wasted as he died of AIDS. The unstable look and size of the piece moves away from portraiture's usually unitary referential quality. A larger pile of sweets represents a bigger, healthier Ross; a smaller pile shows him closer to death. So this portrait is multi-referential: depending on when it is viewed, the portrait refers to different versions of Ross. We can read the piece as a collection of portraits, rather than a single one. Each time a sweet is taken from the pile, a new image is produced. Gonzalez-Torres's installation presents a more nuanced version of selfhood than traditional portraiture is able to achieve: his work presents a body in flux, querying any association between an individual subject and a single image.

Smith's character descriptions similarly combine both visual and linguistic elements, and also share in this sense of multi-referentiality. One moment a character is male, and the other female – depending on the particular angle from which he or she is viewed. Chains of visual references similarly refuse any association between a character and a single image. Smith compares her characters to fictional postcard figures, or real actresses. The latter type of comparison expands her fiction's frame of reference to encompass images outside the text. The approach is a metafictional one: references to real images point up the fabricated status of Smith's fiction's internal images. But it also makes a wider point. It is a comment on how the viewing of others never takes place within a vacuum. A stock of cultural images codes seeing practices: the perception of an individual heavily depends upon the viewer and the viewing context. This context might, for instance, be an interest in 60s France: through watching films and looking at album covers, George and Helena absorb the look of this particular culture and so come to view each other in these terms.

In this respect, Smith's descriptive techniques replicate how visual culture itself shapes how we read and represent others' appearances. A section from Francescho's National Gallery narration in *How to Be Both* makes this point clearly. Francescho is trying to identify the top figure in her own painting of Saint Vincent Ferrer:

but what about that old Christ at the top of it?

Old?

Christ?

like he made it after all all the way to old man when everyone knows Christ's never to be anything other than *unwrinkled eyes shining hair the colour of ripe nut from the hazel tree and parted neatly in the middle like the Nazarenes straight on top falling curlier from the ears down countenance more liable to weep than laugh forehead wide smooth serene no older than 33 and still a most beautiful child of men* old man Christ, why would I paint an old (blaspheming)?³³³

Francescho's confusion is on account of the depiction's dissimilarity to received images, and accordingly Francescho's own mental image, of Christ. The Christ that Francescho sees here is old. This is in stark contrast both to visual precedents and to the impression held by our collective perceptive consciousness, as the italics above express. A casual claim of 'everyone knows' asserts the prevalence of this impression. And that Francescho grants more description to this recollected or imaginary picture than to the actual face depicted shows the entrenchment of this collectively held image. The passage shows a strong visual orientation: 'unwrinkled', 'shining', 'ripe', 'neatly', 'straight', 'curlier', 'wide smooth serene', 'beautiful'. This saturation of adjectives and adverbs, rushed and unpunctuated as with much of Francescho's ekphrases, makes it clear that this particular identity is based in and made up of pre-established visual images.

This is perhaps to be expected of a figure well known to the visual arts. But we can easily carry this reading across from the literal portraits of Smith's fiction to the artistically coded descriptions of her literary characters. Smith's stress on the culturally emplaced and multi-referential nature of appearance argues for a relationship between identity and image that is far from stable. It shows how the image that attaches to a particular individual at a given moment is contingent: Francescho imagines a young Christ simply because this is the version that he is most used to seeing; Helena thinks that George looks like Sylvie Vartan because she has watched many New Wave films.

In these respects, Smith's way of describing her characters argues for the kind of reading approach that I use throughout this study. Smith's fictional depictions reflect how a wider media context influences actual processes of

³³³ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 7.

perceiving and representing identity. Bringing an awareness of this to bear on the resulting representations, whether visual or textual, is crucial in any attempt to unravel the relation between an individual and his or her image(s).

2.3 The Pose

Considering Smith's prose with visual representation in mind reveals how description, far from being ornamental to the narrative, drives much of the thematic content of the author's work. Specifically, Smith's visually sensitive descriptions stage conversations to do with gender and identity, and with the limitations of narrow categorization in both respects. Through fiction, Smith sets out visual representation's possibilities and restrictions, and suggests ways in which the latter might be negotiated or surmounted. In this respect, Smith's prose's perceived visuality is more than a simple reflection or product of a wider visually attuned cultural climate. Instead, it is itself a participant in a long discourse of vision, in which different ways of looking and representing are understood to carry different ethical concerns.

The concerns that attach to portraiture often have to do with questions of identity. And this aspect is what makes the genre such a fruitful foil for the workings of Smith's descriptions. As Richard Brilliant summarizes, portraiture is 'a particular phenomenon of representation in Western art that is especially sensitive to changes in the perceived nature of the individual in Western society'.³³⁴ Accordingly, trends in portraiture can be seen to correlate with contemporaneous ideas of selfhood and identity. Joanna Woodall outlines how one might detect an emerging dualist stress on the distinction between self and physical body in early modern portraiture, for instance:

A sense of the difference between an inner, abstract subjectivity and an objectivised, material body has been discerned in portrait practice from the seventeenth century. Rembrandt's work, for example, is celebrated for its visualisation of the sitter's interiority. Historically, this separation between the body and identity corresponds with the consolidation of the Protestant Reformation, which asserted a space between sign and prototype.³³⁵

³³⁴ Brilliant, *Portraiture*, p. 8.

³³⁵ Joanna Woodall, 'Introduction: Facing the Subject', in *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. by Joanna Woodall (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 1-25 (p.10).

On this reading, the obscured palettes and contemplative faces of Rembrandt's portraits figure as more than aesthetic decisions. They are instead symptoms of a wider discursive climate.

Portraits also construct, as well as simply reflect, identities. During the sixteenth century 'recognised positions, such as the high-ranking cleric, the military leader, the prince, the scholar and the beautiful woman, became associated with distinctive portrait formats, attributes and even pictorial languages'. A portrait's 'employment of a three-quarter-length, usually three-quarter-view of the sitter enthroned in an upright, rectilinear chair', for instance, would identify its subject as a cleric.³³⁶ So certain poses, expressions, props, and accessories perform a specific identity.

But basing one's understanding of an individual on a visual image is an exercise in reduction: it assumes a largely unambiguous link between a person's outward presentation and their identity. This is particularly evident when an image deploys poses or symbols to signify status or profession. But even in Rembrandt's portraits, which apparently acknowledge their subjects' interiority, this subjectivity is nevertheless implied through visual detail: identity can be read from the face or the body.

Portraiture's ability to reduce its subject to a series of visual clues finds its strongest articulation in the form's association with physiognomy. Physiognomy understands visual features as revelatory of a person's nature. It assumes a correlation between visible exterior and internal character. The practice has its origins in Aristotelian thought, but its seminal text is Johann Caspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* of 1772. Lavater's text and accompanying illustrative plates teach a reader how to decipher a pose, or the expression or composition of a face. Lavater reads accomplishment and good taste from 'the aspect, the eye, the nose, especially and the mouth' of one illustration.³³⁷ There is a clear affinity between physiognomic practice and the conventions of traditional visual portraiture. As with Lavater's illustrations, the genre has a long history of consolidating 'socio-artistic

³³⁶ Woodall, 'Introduction', p. 2.

³³⁷ John Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy* (London: William Tegg, 1878), p. 33.

conventions into specific verbal-visual images' that permit 'both the artist and the viewer to categorize the person portrayed in general terms'.³³⁸

Smith's fiction is keenly aware of the limitations that modelling identity on a series of visual clues can bring. Beneath a highly visual descriptive surface, Smith's novels contain an undercurrent of anxiety as to the image's potential to restrict, rather than facilitate, an impression of the other. Smith's work sets out visual representation's failings in respect of gender in particular. In *How to Be Both*, Francescho's father tells her how to become an artist: 'But nobody will take you for such a training wearing the clothes of a woman', he says, 'you can't even be an apprentice to me, wearing the clothes of a woman'. Repetition of the phrase 'wearing the clothes of a woman' locates external signs, in this case clothing, as indicative of gender. Francescho's father continues: 'and in this way you'll be seen to be working with me and your brothers, and then, when you are established, when it is clearly established in other's eyes as to who you have *become* – '.³³⁹ Here an emphasis on the perception of others stresses that in discerning gender, outward appearance is determinative.

Smith's work consistently exposes the shortcomings of such an approach. And Oyeyemi's fiction, as my readings in the following chapter unveil, takes a similar approach in respect of racial identity. Characters in Smith's fiction, meanwhile, consistently have an uncertain relationship with their physical appearances. Ash's self scrutiny in front of a mirror is a case in point:

Her: dark, long dark straight hair. Small, neat, mouth full, eyes brown, shielded, a cat's. Me: fair, gangling, then, hair short and rough and yellow, mouth a line, eyes grey blue, the only thing about myself I liked, holding my hand up over my lower face and looking at my eyes in the mirror. Me: taller, no breasts yet, gawky, hard thin slight body, so like a boy that I had to have my ears pierced to stop people in shops calling me son. Her: a girl. Really a girl, girly clothes, the kind of girl I despised, I wouldn't be seen dead with, the kind who would never vault a gate, who would never dare climb a tree. Her: always catching me out.³⁴⁰

Like much of Smith's visual characterization, the dominant mode here is comparative. The repeated 'her' and 'me' lends this passage rhythm and structure.

³³⁸ Brilliant, *Portraiture*, p. 37.

³³⁹ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 32.

³⁴⁰ Smith, *Like*, p. 171-172.

These alternating descriptions function as building blocks for the imagination: step-by-step they help the reader towards a visualization of each girl. As seen elsewhere, Smith uses strong visual contrast to heighten this visualization. The arrangement of opposite features distinguishes and defines; this complementary descriptive approach renders both subjects, Ash and Amy, more vivid.

Perhaps unexpectedly, this approach encourages in the reader the exact kind of visual judgement that its narrator is so uncomfortable with: Smith's prose tells of the problematic relationship between visual image and gender, and simultaneously shows how it operates. Descriptive detail – 'taller, no breasts yet, gawky, hard thin slight body' – creates a firm impression of Ash's appearance. And in this sense the reader's approach maps onto that of those 'people in shops', who register Ash's appearance as boyish.

Ash's objection to such visual identification is clear. The passage works through disassociation. The mirror serves as a device to distance Ash from her appearance: she considers her image in the mirror as if it were a wholly detached picture. This distancing effect carries over into the passage's language. Vocabulary is objective, relying on simple, unambiguous adjectives: 'small', 'brown', 'blue', 'thin'. The tone, aside from the single emotive 'I liked', is dispassionate. This dispassionate tone attaches both to Ash's self-appraisal and to her assessment of Amy: her ability to consider her own appearance and an external image in the same terms stresses Ash's severance from her reflection.

Smith's description instructs its reader in the nuances of visual characterization. It directs attention towards Ash's and Amy's appearances, and simultaneously stresses the limitations of such a focus. The passage builds a vivid picture of each character, only to undercut this representation with its final remark: 'Her: always catching me out'. The phrase closes the vignette, reminding the reader of its wider narrative context. It reminds the reader that Amy would 'be seen' with Ash, that Amy does 'vault a gate' and that she would dare to 'climb a tree', for a memory of Amy climbing a tree in fact prompted this inset reverie. In undercutting its own visual premise, the passage asks its reader for a response emulative of Ash's own experience. That is, it asks for a reassessment of first visual impression, and for a recalibration of Amy's appearance in respect of her character. So the passage as a whole shows and comments upon the drawbacks of using outward form as a measure

of character, arguing in particular against the gendered associations that attach to certain physical traits.

In light of such complications, Smith's fiction proposes certain solutions. In particular, it shows how subjects can anticipate, and so manage the outcome of, being seen: in effect, strike a pose. In this study's introduction I mentioned Silverman's discussion of subjectivity's dependence on the image. According to Silverman, contemporary visual conditions produce a media-determined self-awareness in the subject. 'Three technologies play a preeminent role' in this production, 'all of which depend centrally upon the camera: still photography, cinema, and video'. 'Perhaps surprisingly', Silverman writes, 'it is the first of these technologies, rather than the second or the third, that has the greatest importance for how we experience our specularity'.³⁴¹

By specularity, Silverman means the visual orientation of human subjectivity – its constitution through and composition out of a series of images. Writing in 1996, Silverman suggests that photography provides the structure for the version of specularity that prevails at the end of the twentieth century. Silverman's overall premise, that we experience ourselves as seen, still stands. And, as Cole's fiction tells us, while photography has to compete against a range of new image making technologies, it continues to play a significant part in the production of this experience. The ubiquitous photographic image arguably remains the defining image of early twenty-first century culture, just as it was for the twentieth century.

As Silverman outlines, a wider photographic condition does not simply provide an external backdrop within which perceptions of the self and reality are formed. Rather, the subject actually interiorizes aspects of photographic representation: 'It is not only that this imaginary camera lens intervenes between the world and our look, structuring what we see in photographic terms, but that we experience ourselves-as-spectacle in relation to it'.³⁴² The result is self-consciousness as to our outward presentation, an awareness of being seen. And the individual acts accordingly. Pose is a primary example of how we give ourselves up to be seen. 'It is first and foremost through the pose', Silverman suggests, 'that the

³⁴¹ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 195.

³⁴² Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 197.

subject gives him- or herself to be apprehended in a particular way by the real or metaphoric camera'.³⁴³ Three aspects in particular give the act prominence: its essentially imitative nature; its conjuration of an 'explicit or implicit frame'; and its generation of 'mise-en-scène'.³⁴⁴

Silverman suggests that the pose can afford the subject an, albeit limited, degree of self-presentational agency. And as I will outline, character description in Smith's fiction promotes a similar sense of the subject's possibility for manipulation of his or her image. While these manipulations might not be exclusively photographic, it helps to think of acts of self-presentation in Smith's work with a mind to visual representation. For it is clear that any such acts issue from the wider media-determined awareness of being seen that Silverman denotes as our contemporary specularly.

Various vignettes of mirror gazing, as in Ash's contemplation of her boyish figure above, express such awareness.³⁴⁵ Astrid in *The Accidental*, upon looking in the mirror and seeing 'the imprint of her own thumb below her cheekbone where she slept', figures herself as 'the kind of pottery things her mother buys'. The potters 'leave the actual marks of their hands in it as their signature' and Astrid imagines that she too has 'signed herself in her sleep'.³⁴⁶ Significantly, the analogy pivots on a visual similarity – the obvious imprint of a thumbprint signature – and so stresses Astrid's understanding of herself as something to be viewed.

The beginning of *There but for the* provides a discursive aside on this contemporary condition of being-seenness:

It was as if the whole outside world was TV soundtrack. Maybe there was a new psychosis, Tennis Players' psychosis (TPP), where you went through life believing that an audience was always watching you, profoundly moved by your every move, reacting round your every reaction, your every momentous moment, with joy / excitement / disappointment / Schadenfreude.³⁴⁷

³⁴³ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 202.

³⁴⁴ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 203.

³⁴⁵ Smith, *Like*, pp. 171-172.

³⁴⁶ Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 15.

³⁴⁷ Smith, *There but for the*, p. 8.

Anna goes on to consider herself in these mediated, watched terms: reading an email makes her feel ‘super-eighted, instamaticked’.³⁴⁸

Astrid’s world in *The Accidental* is similarly structured in photographic terms:

The outside world shifts on her eyes, like an inside photograph then the inside photograph is laid over the outside world when she opens them. If she could take photographs with her eyes it would be amazing. If she could do this and she had wings i.e. in the myth with the wings, she could take aerial photographs. She would soar over everything like in a helicopter. The substandard nothing of the village would be obvious. The smallness of these massive trees she is standing under would be like obvious. She could fly over home. She would be able to hold the whole house in the palm of her hand. She would fly over the whole school in a fraction of a second. All the people in the classrooms doing French right now, and the sports field, the playground, the streets around the school, would be like nothing, smaller than the palm of her hand and getting smaller and smaller depending on how high in the sky she chose to go.³⁴⁹

Astrid sees the world through an imaginary camera lens. A quick listing of sights – trees, house, school, sports field, playground, streets – stresses the all-encompassing nature of the photographic aerial viewpoint. The closing sentence’s patterning of ‘smaller [...] smaller and smaller’ explains the diminution of objects when seen from above. Stress on ‘obvious’ shows the ease with which Astrid imaginatively recreates this viewpoint. An illusion to the Icarus myth, a story so often represented in the visual arts and itself symbolic of artistic hubris, cements the impression that here Astrid is engaging in an act of visual representation.

Astrid’s internalization of photographic practice is also self-directed. She imagines how she and Amber would translate into film, wishing that ‘someone else was filming them both from the outside’. In the absence of an actual photographer, she imagines the result: ‘They would look like an older person and a younger person who are having a day out and are really good friends or maybe sisters, sometimes even walking about with their arms linked’.³⁵⁰ Astrid is able to consider her image from a detached extrinsic viewpoint. She is aware of how she is seen and manages her behaviour accordingly for the benefit of this imagined external gaze.

³⁴⁸ Smith, *There but for the*, p. 9.

³⁴⁹ Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 26.

³⁵⁰ Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 110.

So characters in Smith's fiction think of outward appearance as representational in nature, as a mediated image to be seen. And like Astrid they manipulate this image with an audience in mind. While not relying wholly on the pose, acts of self-presentation in Smith's fiction very often call on the wider organizational principles of this stance; its conspicuous assumption of outward form, for instance, or its ability to frame the self.

A passage from *How to Be Both* shows this kind of image management:

George looks at her mother. Her mother looks at George. A yellow-white flower drops, brushes past her mother's nose, catches in her hair and comes to rest on her collarbone. Her mother laughs. George feels the urge to laugh too, though she is still wearing her guilt / fury scowl. Half her mouth turns up. The other half holds its downward shape.³⁵¹

An initial exchange of glances locates George and her mother's interaction as a specifically visual one. George watches a falling flower in close detail, with the prose slowing the fall into its constituent movements. This highly wrought description of a single impression shows George's sensitivity to the aesthetics of the moment. She notes the shade of the flower as being halfway between two colours. She considers compositional details: the flower's progression from nose to hair to collarbone frames her mother's face within the context of this episode, and also traces it out for the reader. Such close detailing stresses George's receptivity to the look of things.

The episode's temporality also asks that we consider its components in visual terms. Smith slows time. The descriptive space that she grants to the movement of a single flower or the look of a single expression is disproportionate to the surrounding narrative, which has a much quicker pace. So distillation encourages measured attention to the objects described, marking out this sequence of discrete visual impressions as a series of objects to be viewed.

Rosalind Krauss, writing on the readymade, cites framing and observation as two processes capable of transforming a common found object into a work of art: 'It is about the physical transposition of an object from the continuum of reality into the

³⁵¹ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 247.

fixed condition of the art-image by a moment of isolation, or selection'.³⁵² The above passage's objects – exchanged glances, falling flower, contorted mouth – are similarly extracted from the narrative progression into a state of fixity. Slow attention transforms them from typical descriptive detailing into images in their own right. Prose description, in emulating the logic of the displayed art object, encourages its reader to consider the look of things closely.

The visual sensitivity that George shows in this extract is not wholly directed outwards: she is also conscious of how she represents herself. She is keenly aware of how facial expression can communicate emotion: laughter is incompatible with an assertion of anger. And she struggles to control this outward aspect accordingly. Her expression aims for a particular effect, prompted by the knowledge that someone is watching.

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes explains how this outwardly oriented and motivated stance works in relation to photography:

It can happen that I am observed without knowing it, and again I cannot speak of this experience, since I have determined to be guided by the consciousness of my feelings. But very often (too often, to my taste) I have been photographed and knew it. Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself into an image. This transformation is an active one.³⁵³

George's behaviour conforms to the criteria of Barthes's photographic pose. She demonstrates an awareness of being watched and acts accordingly. From a consideration of her mother's face as an image, framed and offset by a falling flower, George goes on to construe herself in like visual terms. Her appreciation for how her countenance looks is clear. She considers her face from an exteriorized viewpoint: 'downward shape' is something to be seen by others, as well as felt herself.

As with Barthes, George's transformation is an active one. She manipulates the conventions of facial expression, knowing that this particular scowl will be received as 'guilt / fury'. George demonstrates a similar presentational awareness,

³⁵² Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America', *October*, 3 (1977), 68-81, (p. 78).

³⁵³ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 10-11.

and corresponding manipulation, throughout the novel: ‘she considers risking looking insolent’; she ‘placed a look in the same way on her own face to let Mrs Rock know she wasn’t going to say anything’.³⁵⁴ Taken together, such passages suggest that an appearance privileging representational framework need not preclude those within this framework from influencing how they appear and are perceived. George knows that she is observed, and poses accordingly.

But this is not to say that a subject’s active assumption of a pose or expression amounts to total control over his or her own image. Silverman calls on Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* to show why this is not the case. Sherman’s photographic series depicts the artist in a variety of fictional roles and scenarios, with each image looking like a moment from a film. The result is a projection of a ‘whole array of stereotypical Hollywood or New Wave heroines’.³⁵⁵ For Silverman, the pose that Sherman takes up in each photograph is of predominant interest: it ‘indicates her desire to be seen in a particular, generally flattering way, by a real or imaginary look, which – because it is more formally than diegetically specified – comes to be symbolic of the camera/gaze’.³⁵⁶ As with George’s self-conscious adoption of set expressions in *How to Be Both*, Sherman’s character in these images hopes to manage how her image is received. These photographs are ‘flamboyantly ‘about’ the pose as solicitation to be photographed in a certain way’.³⁵⁷ Silverman’s promotion of the formal over the diegetic quality of this action stresses that the look and physical arrangement of a stance, rather than a viewer’s knowledge prior or external to the scene, carries the impact.

Silverman outlines the limitations that attach to the self-conscious, or camera-seeking, pose. In order for the meaning of such a pose to be understood, the visual tropes deployed must be widely recognisable. As a result, they tend towards cliché. Sherman’s character in *Untitled Film Stills* runs through a repertoire of common facial expressions and gestures. She expresses concern in ‘Untitled Film Still #3’ and coyness in ‘Untitled Film Still #14’.³⁵⁸ The poses ‘evoke normative

³⁵⁴ Ali Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 315, p. 367.

³⁵⁵ Rosalind E. Krauss, *Bachelors* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press), p. 102

³⁵⁶ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 208.

³⁵⁷ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 208.

³⁵⁸ Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still # 3*, 1977, gelatin silver print, 18 x 24 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #14*, 1978, gelatin silver print, 24 x 19.1 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

ideals of one sort or another' and so illustrate 'not merely that one can only give oneself to be seen via an image drawn from the screen, but also that, for the most part, the subject gravitates for this purpose to those images which have been culturally valorized'.³⁵⁹ So Sherman's work exposes the pose's tendency towards stereotype, both in its assumption and reception, and points up how such stereotypes are often constituted in and prized by film.

Sherman's illustration of the filmic or photographic pose's stereotypical nature shows that when an individual presents a particular self-image, the parameters within which he or she does so are limited. Returning to Smith's description of George's 'guilt / fury' scowl with Sherman's film stills in mind, we find that George's act now looks more constrained than deliberate. As explained, visual principles – suggestion of a frame, attention to minute detail, a near static quality – organise the passage from which the detail is taken. And as with conventional visual representations of the face, it relies on a stable correlation between external form and meaning: mouth turned upwards equals 'guilt', mouth turned downwards equals 'fury'. Although George's assumption of this particular expression is a controlled and active one, it is nevertheless determined by its communicative intent: it is chosen for the benefit of its observer, and so must fall within a range of accepted visual motifs.

Literary description takes its cue visual description in this respect. In order to fulfil its mimetic function, it must not deviate too far from established representational norms. Through its repetition, in visual representation as in real social interaction, the scowl has come to semaphore anger. We, along with George's mother, easily picture and parse George's face: we have seen endless variations of this expression before. So the cultural image stock sways literary poses just as, as Sherman's stills expose, it circumscribes actual ones. A photograph of George's mother, for instance, effectively conveys sadness because 'the curve of her hair (which is coloured between dark and light) round her face makes her face look like the mask that means sadness in Greek ancients'.³⁶⁰ Some pages later, an open mouth reads as 'astonishment'.³⁶¹ In both instances, the visual clue upon which the

³⁵⁹ Silverman, *Threshold*, p.208.

³⁶⁰ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 102.

³⁶¹ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 180.

assessment is based depends heavily on image convention: visual precedent delimits textual description.

The strict unity between visual form and meaning that such descriptions express runs counter to the freer, deconstructed sentiment of Smith's work. Her fiction is critical of assigning identity on the basis of outward appearance, or indeed at all. Gender in Smith's novels figures as fluid and difficult to pin to determined characteristics, clothing or names; the latter are frequently androgynous. Passages concerned with the complexities of visual perception express this fluidity most pointedly. In Smith's retelling of the myth of Iphis, characters are either 'boy or girl or both', necessitating a constant reassessment of initial visual impressions: 'And I saw. It wasn't a boy at all. It was a beautiful girl'.³⁶² Smith's narratives are consistently wary of claiming a one-to-one correspondence between outward form and inner meaning, asserting instead an arbitrary relation between gender and appearance.

This being the case, it is surprising that Smith's prose should rely so heavily on visual character description, limited as it is by its mimetic function and its recourse to stock images. I suggest that didacticism accounts for this disjoint between the thematic content and the technical operation of Smith's fiction. Ernst van Alphen, writing on contemporary art, explains how '[a]rtists who have made it their project to challenge the originality and homogeneity of human subjectivity or the authority of mimetic representation often choose the portrait as the genre through which to make their point'.³⁶³ Because portraiture has long asserted 'the uniqueness and authenticity of the portrayed subject' along with an associated 'unity of the signifier and signified', the genre presents itself as the perfect platform for those wishing to question such claims.³⁶⁴ Smith's description operates on a similar principle. Her prose calls on a visually privileging framework not necessarily to assert its validity, but rather to question its assumptions and to understand better its workings.

³⁶² Ali Smith, *Girl Meets Boy* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2007), p. 15.

³⁶³ Ernst van Alphen, *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. xvii.

³⁶⁴ van Alphen, *Art in Mind*, p. xvi.

A final example from *How to Be Both* illustrates the efficacy of Smith's method in this respect:

I hear someone behind me: I turn: a man is standing between the folds of canvas that make the door of my workshop: he's quite young: he is adorned: his clothes are very beautiful: he himself inside the clothes is also good on the eye and he has an arrogance that actually has a colour: I will try quite a few times after this to mix that colour but will never be able to get it. He is looking at my painting: he is shaking his head.
It's wrong, he says.
Says who? I say.
Marsyas is a satyr and therefore male, he says.
Says who? I say.
Says the story, he says. Say the scholars. Say the centuries. Says everyone. You can't do this. It's a travesty. Says me.³⁶⁵

The passage expresses firstly the entrenchment and secondly the limitations of identity models that take outward appearance as their basis. It begins with a standard visual assessment, as Francescho interprets Cosimo Tura's appearance for the reader. Adornment and beautiful clothes denote wealth. Arrogance registers, synaesthetically, as a colour. As with much of Smith's characterization, the description's main mode is visual. And its attention to detail is typically rich. A quick series of adjectives – 'young', 'adorned', 'beautiful', 'good on the eye' – build to give a firm impression of the subject in just a few lines. Francescho's assessment of the other artist relies wholly on a reading of external, visual markers.

Smith allows her protagonist to make this visual judgment, but then mounts a strong critique as to the limitations of doing so. Cosimo is unable to comprehend Marsyas, made female in Francescho's painting, as other than how he typically appears: generally as muscular and often bearded, emphatically male.³⁶⁶ This stereotype has a clear visual basis, which Smith's prose highlights. The scene foregrounds visuality: it describes two painters looking at a painting. And the repetition of 'says' stresses this conventional representation's firm establishment in a shared cultural consciousness.

Francescho's initial assessment of Cosimo pivots on standard visual tropes: beauty, colour, and accessory are taken as outward signs of personality. And yet

³⁶⁵ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 174-175.

³⁶⁶ See, for instance: Michelangelo Anselmi, *Apollo and Marsyas* (1491-1492); or Titian, *The Flaying of Marsyas* (c. 1570-1576).

Francescho's own work's refusal to conform to the established stereotype is, the passage proposes, positive. An understanding of identity as manipulable, rather than as attached to a single or standard image allows for a challenging and compelling depiction. Cosimo's subsequent theft of the fictional painting stresses the ultimate desirability of this non-standard representation, as does Smith's exuberant description of it:

the inner body of the musician is twisting up out of the skin in a kind of ecstasy like the skin's a thick flow of fabric coming rich in one piece off the shoulder and peeling away at the same time from the wrists and the ankles in little pieces like a blown upward snow of confetti: the body appears through the skin's unpeeling like the bride undressing after the wedding: but bright red, crystal red: best of all the musician catches the skin over the very arm it's coming off and folding itself, neat.³⁶⁷

So while Smith's prose consistently emulates the arrangement and techniques of visual art, this emulation itself constitutes a framework within which to explore the limitations of such an approach. Her work incorporates aspects of visual representation, lending its description vibrancy and drawing out language's own representational possibilities: its ability, contra Lessing, to convey space as well as time, for instance. Importantly this incorporation has a discursive, as well as a technical, function. Smith's fiction considers how visually motivated expression might resist a tendency towards conservatism or stereotype. It considers how it might resist the model of straightforward referentiality associated with portraiture, giving voice instead to a multiple, disjointed or atypical relation between one's image and one's identity.

³⁶⁷ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 174.

2.4 Invisibility

Using the conventions of visual representation as a lens through which to view Smith's character description reveals how the latter shares some of the concerns and restraints of its visual counterpart. Smith's descriptive techniques relay how wider visual convention and image precedents circumscribe appearance or behaviour's visual components. Across the author's work characters appear frustrated by how others read them. Ash wants to be taken for a girl even if she appears as a boy. George wants to communicate anger, even if her face is a picture of guilt.

In the face of such limitations, visually interested prose has a possible advantage over actual visual representation. It can invoke the visual field, and map out its constraints, but it can also withdraw from it. Literary description is more open-ended than the literal image. More mediating factors are at play: the nuances or contingencies of linguistic expression, or the role of the reader's imagination. Prose can also do away with the visual clues that typically mark out certain identity organizations, in particular those that rely heavily on outward appearance, such as race or gender. Names, understood as similar external markers, can also be made flexible. As noted, androgynous names like George or Robin are a trope in Smith's work. Pronouns can also, with effort, be avoided. Or an author might use the second person instead of the third.

In *There but for the*, nine-year-old Brooke considers the post-racial possibilities of novelistic description: 'The fact is, I can be Hermione if I like', Brooke thinks, 'I can be Anne of Green Gables. Her hair can be the colour of mine if I like'.³⁶⁸ The point is that literary expression can sustain more nuance than the literal image, which generally demands a greater degree of visual specificity. Smith's fiction exploits prose's capacity for keeping visual detail hidden, presenting invisibility as a possible strategy for the negotiation of a complex contemporary image environment. My reading of invisibility in Smith's fiction intersects to a certain degree with Nicholas Mirzoeff's promotion of a counterhistory for visibility – a history that exposes the traditional visual field as an oppressive place, and stresses

³⁶⁸ Smith, *There but for the*, p. 320; the reference to 'Hermione' is presumably an allusion to the character in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*.

the potential productiveness of a subject's disappearance from view.³⁶⁹ This productiveness is an idea, as I set out earlier, that Cole's fiction is particularly keen to express. And Oyeyemi, too, considers the possibilities of withdrawing from or manipulating the visual field as a response to its failings in respect of representing racial identity.

But my main conversation here is with Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Phelan's study attends to the blind spots in the visual field and reads invisibility, rather than its opposite, as a highly useful modality for political empowerment. 'By locating a subject in what cannot be reproduced within the ideology of the visible', Phelan aims to 'revalue a belief in subjectivity and identity which is not visibly representable'.³⁷⁰ Smith's fiction tests out Phelan's premise, examining the currency of invisibility or absence as a mode of empowerment.

Across the author's work, characters express a desire for disappearance. In *Like*, Ash describes a dream to Amy:

You know, I said, I've been having this horrible dream, I've had it three times now. I can't get it out of my head. What do you dream? she said, and I told her about the reflection, the surface of the water. I look and look, I said, but I can't find it anywhere.

Think of it, Ash, she said. You're blessed with a reflection that has a mind of her own. Other people see themselves on the surface of things, but you're lucky. Not only can you see past the mere mirror of yourself. Even more, your reflection is free to go where she wants, do what she wants, regardless of what's expected of her. She's a reflection who is free to choose. She doesn't even look like you, she's so free.³⁷¹

The framing device of a dream promotes imagelessness as an aspiration. Amy's positive interpretation of the dream – her friend is 'blessed' and 'lucky' – reiterates the desirability of having no fixed image. Having no outward appearance, or an appearance that changes from day to day, is a kind of freedom.

The passage's association of invisibility with liberation aligns with Phelan's claim that 'there is real power in remaining unmarked'.³⁷² Phelan's aim is to

³⁶⁹ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011).

³⁷⁰ Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 1.

³⁷¹ Smith, *Like*, p. 293.

³⁷² Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 6.

‘construct a way of knowing which does not take the surveillance of the object, visible or otherwise, as its chief aim’.³⁷³ Knowledge that does have a visual basis, she argues, is compromised. By definition, a representation does not match up exactly to the real that it denotes. And yet too often such a correlation is assumed. This treatment of representation as truth rests on several assumptions, the most damaging being that ‘the relationship between representation and identity is linear and smoothly mimetic’.³⁷⁴ It follows that visibility is an inadequate sphere for the representation of identity: it aims to define its object, with little provision for nuance or multiplicity. An episode in *There but for the* voices this sense of the image’s inadequacy: ‘Film that you cameras. Let’s see how much it’s possible to know about what’s really happening by filming me sitting here today. Go on, prove I was there. Show us what it meant, that I was’.³⁷⁵ Anna’s challenge to the CCTV cameras queries any stable relation between filming – and by association, visual representation more generally – and knowing. As the final sentence implies, capturing either meaning or being is beyond the visual image’s scope.

Phelan wants to ‘advance a more ethical and psychically rewarding representational field, one that sidesteps the usual traps of visibility: surveillance, fetishism, voyeurism’.³⁷⁶ And invisibility plays a decisive part in this. Crucially, unmarkedness does not equate to disempowerment: ‘there is an important difference’, Phelan stresses, ‘between wilfully failing to appear and never being summoned’.³⁷⁷ A similar sentiment can be traced through Smith’s fiction. Smith’s characters explore wilful absence or invisibility as a corrective to Phelan’s ‘ideology of the visible’ – ‘an ideology which erases the power of the unmarked, unspoken and unseen’.³⁷⁸

Midway through a dinner party in *There but for the*, Miles locks himself in his hosts’ spare room and stays there for the remainder of the novel. His host explains:

It is strange having a stranger

³⁷³ Phelan, *Unmarked*, pp. 1-2.

³⁷⁴ Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 7.

³⁷⁵ Smith, *There but for the*, p. 65.

³⁷⁶ Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 10.

³⁷⁷ Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 11.

³⁷⁸ Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 7.

in the house with you all the
time. It makes you strangely
self-aware, strange to yourself.
It is literally like living with
a mystery. Sometimes I stand
in the hall and listen to the
silence. It sounds uncanny
and feels like I imagine
being haunted must feel like.³⁷⁹

Although Miles is mostly absent, he nevertheless exerts a marked influence over both the narrative and its characters. His invisibility is a productive force. It generates defamiliarization, making others feel 'strange, self-aware'. It determines the narrative's predominant mood, which is one of uncertainty and continued speculation: '*would a man in shutting himself in / be asking things to stop or to begin*'; '*would he be testing whether he'd be missed / would such an inversion mean he'd not exist?*'; 'He doesn't look anything like Mr Garth looks in the room, Brooke said. Well, none of us knows for sure, do we Brooke? Mrs Lee said'.³⁸⁰

Engaged and active forms of invisibility can be found across Smith's fiction to similar effect. Characters are wary of offering up their images. And in the process they show invisibility to be an empowering, even disruptive, instrument. Amber in *The Accidental*, for instance, consistently destroys records of her own image. The result is to ensure a certain control over how she is perceived, and to prevent others from using or distributing her image. She drops a camera from a motorway bridge, destroying any record of herself: 'The dawn footage is on the bedside table. But it stops on the day that Amber came'.³⁸¹ With her physical departure Amber's image also fades, not persisting in memory or in another media form. Astrid finds it 'hard to remember exactly what Amber looked like'. And looking for a material record offers up no results: 'she has searched through the holiday photos, but before her mother left she must have censored them for pictures that had Amber in it'.³⁸² Amber embodies certain key ideas in this novel: her role is to fracture normality, to prompt self-reflection in the other characters. And so her characteristic refusal to be pinned to a single image comes to be associated with like ideas of freedom, risk, and truth.

³⁷⁹ Smith, *There but for the*, p. 106.

³⁸⁰ Smith, *There but for the*, p. 85, p. 102, p. 292.

³⁸¹ Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 119.

³⁸² Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 228.

Smith sharpens her reader's sense of invisibility's desirability by clearly mapping out its alternative:

It is very hard work indeed, she answered, to be a woman and alive in this hemisphere in this day and age. It asks a lot, to be able to do all the things we're supposed to do the way we're expected to do them. Talent. Sex. Money. Family. The correct modest intelligence. The correct thinness. The correct presence.³⁸³

Here Eve articulates what characters across Smith's fiction want to withdraw from: set prescriptions as to how one ought to be or behave. And her mention of 'thinness' and 'presence' stresses that the visual, material realm is where such pressures come to rest. So Smith's characters withdraw from view in a response to visual representation's perceived limitations. And in this respect Smith challenges, as Phelan does, the 'implicit assumptions about the connection between representational visibility and political power'.³⁸⁴

This challenge plays out most forcefully in her fiction's discussion of pornographic images. *The Accidental* provides a typical exposition of visual representation's bearing on violence in this respect. Magnus's photo editing prompts a girl's suicide: 'They took her head. They put it on the other body. They sent it round the email list. Then she killed herself'.³⁸⁵ Smith's text stresses that pornography, both its production and its consumption, is an emphatically visual experience. Magnus describes how his act was, above all, the creation of an image: 'First they scanned her. Then they scanned the other picture. Then they dragged the head onto the other picture. Then they emailed the jpeg around the image list'.³⁸⁶ And reception of this image is an act of visual consumption: 'Forty people in the upper sixth probably saw that picture. Twenty-six people in the lower sixth probably saw it. Magnus can't calculate how many other people possibly saw it, or can still see it'.³⁸⁷

In this novel, the pornographic image emblemizes sight's capacity for objectification and violence. Repetition, both of key words and of longer phrases,

³⁸³ Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 85.

³⁸⁴ Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 1.

³⁸⁵ Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 30.

³⁸⁶ Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 37.

³⁸⁷ Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 41.

characterizes this particular narrative strand. Initially denotative of Magnus's trauma, these reiterative patterns entrench the association between Magnus's act and violence. The organization of Magnus's initial explanation – 'They took her head. They fixed it on another body' – resurfaces throughout his retelling of the event: 'They took her head. They put it on a different body'.³⁸⁸ The phrase's dispersal throughout the text works to stress the violence done to the girl: the image segments and rearranges her body. The wording's quick succinctness echoes the cutting it describes. While the tone is dull, the simple verbs used – taking, fixing, putting – express possession and projection.

An objectifying look that dehumanizes and dissects the female body recurs throughout Magnus's narrative:

Anton had a new phone. It lit up. It played a dimensional tone. He was using it to take photos of bits of girls at Registration. He lined it up on passing girls, pressed the button. All the girls look the same this year, Anton said in his ear. He was pleased someone like Anton had singled him out to tell him something like that in his ear. Look, Anton said. They all look like they're off porn sites. It was true. After you've looked at sites, all girls start to look like it. Singers on the music channels all look like it, well, the girls anyway.³⁸⁹

Girls, broken down into 'bits', figure as composite images to be captured and consumed. The extract tells of the dangers and influence of sexualized imagery as a common representational currency. The sentiment expressed brings to mind Silverman's sense of the cultural image stock's impact on the eye – that wider 'image-repertoire through which the late-twentieth-century subject sees and is seen'.³⁹⁰

Silverman takes her cue from Vilém Flusser, who outlines how images intercede between viewer and world:

Images are mediations between the world and human beings. Human beings 'ex-ist', i.e. the world is not immediately accessible to them and therefore images are needed to make it comprehensible. However, as soon as this happens, images come between the world and human beings. They are supposed to be maps but they turn into screens: Instead of representing the world, they obscure it until human beings' lives finally become a function of

³⁸⁸ Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 36, p. 37.

³⁸⁹ Smith, *The Accidental*, pp. 50-51.

³⁹⁰ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 196.

the images they create. Human beings cease to decode the images and instead project them, still encoded, into the world ‘out there’, which meanwhile itself becomes an image – a context of scenes, of states of things.³⁹¹

We find exactly this replacement of reality with received image in Anton’s assessment of the ‘passing girls’. Smith’s wording makes clear that the girls’ resemblance to pornographic images is projected, rather than intentional on their part: ‘after you’ve looked at sites, all girls start to look like it’.³⁹² The ‘before’ and ‘after’ arrangement stresses that Anton’s way of looking is the result of having internalised images viewed previously.

In this respect, the wider image culture is more than an external environment. Rather, ‘the screen or cultural image repertoire inhabits each of us’.³⁹³ What this means, Silverman explains, is that

when we apprehend another person or an object, we necessarily do so via that large, diverse, but ultimately finite range of representational coordinates which determine what and how the members of our culture see – how they process visual detail, and what meaning they give to it. And just as certain words suggest themselves to us more readily than others, because they are the currency of daily use in our society, so certain representational coordinates propose themselves as more appropriate frames through which to apprehend the world than others, simply because they are subject within our society to a more frequent and emphatic articulation.³⁹⁴

Sexualized images of women provide the representational coordinates for Anton and Magnus in *The Accidental*. Viewing through this pornographic frame, Smith’s fiction tells us, objectifies and does violence to the objects of such a gaze. Desiring invisibility, disengaging from the normative representational logic of the given viewing culture, seems an appropriate response in this respect.

And yet this is not the only response available to Smith’s characters. *How to Be Both* offers up an alternative. A ‘loving look’, Silverman writes, can ‘at least temporarily erase’ the damage done by a violent gaze. If many such looks act in concert, they can

³⁹¹ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), pp. 9-10.

³⁹² Smith *The Accidental*, p. 51.

³⁹³ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 221.

³⁹⁴ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 221.

‘reterritorialize the screen, bringing new elements into cultural prominence, and casting into darkness those which presently constitute normative representation’.³⁹⁵ In Smith’s novel, George’s compulsive watching of a pornographic film clip expresses this possibility for a recasting of the dominant image culture. The clip is disturbing. Smith describes the ‘the uncomplaining smallness of the girl alongside her evident discomfort and the way she looked both there and absent’. This girl is ‘pale and pained with her shut eyes and her open o of a mouth’.³⁹⁶

George’s response to the clip is unconventional. Her viewing practice demonstrates neither the complicity attendant on enjoyment, nor the refusal of responsibility associated with disgust. Instead, her re-watching is a recuperative act. She explains why she feels compelled to watch it again and again:

This really happened, George said. To *this* girl. And anyone can watch it just, like, happening, any time he or she likes. And it happens for the first time, over and over again, every time someone who hasn’t seen it before clicks on it and watches it. So I want to watch it for a completely different reason. Because my completely different watching of it goes some way to acknowledging all of that to this girl. Do you still not understand?³⁹⁷

A stress on ‘different’ positions George’s watching as reactionary: it asserts itself in distinction to an established viewing norm. George’s visual response surpasses simple watching, proceeding instead to an analysis and recognition of what the clip means for its subject and viewer. Her assertive repetition of ‘*this*’ works deictically. It aims to root her father’s, and the reader’s, response in the reality of the viewed girl’s situation. It is a pointed plea for an appraisal that goes beyond surface impression, and that instead properly considers the viewed object.

George’s father’s response is less insightful, serving as a counterpart to George’s. He refuses to engage: ‘I can’t even *look* at it. And anyway. That girl. I mean. It probably happened years ago’; ‘She held the screen up. Her father put the flat of his hand over his eyes’.³⁹⁸ By contrast, George’s interaction with the footage is so thorough that it entirely shifts her perception, coding how she subsequently views the world: it ‘had changed something in the structures of George’s brain and

³⁹⁵ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 223.

³⁹⁶ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 221.

³⁹⁷ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 224.

³⁹⁸ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 223, p. 224.

heart and certainly her eyes, so that afterwards when George tried to watch any more of this kind of sexual film that girl was there waiting under them all'.³⁹⁹

So the visual frame that George brings to the world has shifted. George engages in the very act that Flusser reads as absent from the contemporary viewer's typical practice: she decodes the image in front of her. And in so doing she demonstrates how, as Silverman suggests, a non-standard look can 'reterritorialize the screen'.⁴⁰⁰ For this reclamation to take place, a non-standard look must operate in tandem with a multitude of other such looks. When acting in isolation, the individual gaze is only partly transformative. But when supported by others, it shifts the visual paradigm: 'Under such necessarily collective conditions, the look could significantly change how the camera/gaze 'photographs' the world'.⁴⁰¹

Silverman's reading of vision's productive potential asks for a reconsideration of Phelan's promotion of invisibility as an effective political force. Phelan's claim is that visibility confines its object: 'In framing more and more images of the hitherto under-represented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name, and thus to arrest and fix, the image of that other'.⁴⁰² But Silverman's argument, along with its correspondent in Smith's fiction, offers a solution. It suggests that the emphasis rest not on the fact of representation, but on how representations are received. While for Phelan a multiplication of imagery is the problem, for Silverman the multiple responses that such images afford opens the way for the development of an ethical viewing practice. Rather than fixing the other, a collection of looks can do justice to the complexity of that other.

In *World Spectators*, Silverman outlines how others' looks play a fundamental role in the construction of an individual's subjectivity. She recognizes the scepticism that often attaches to visual representation, acknowledging that 'when others look at us from a perspective other than the one from which we are accustomed to regard ourselves, we generally accuse them of not seeing us properly, or even of not allowing us to be ourselves'. She writes of how 'we experience every visual

³⁹⁹ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 221.

⁴⁰⁰ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 223.

⁴⁰¹ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 223.

⁴⁰² Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 2.

‘augmentation’ as an unconscionable colonization or subordination’.⁴⁰³ Looking, on this reading, involves imposition and misreading. Phelan suggests that invisibility might counter this version of vision, a sentiment we find echoed in Smith’s disappearing characters.

But Silverman understands the situation otherwise:

I am working with a very different set of visual assumptions here. It is my view that were others to look at us through our own eyes, ‘ourselves’ is precisely what we would never be. We can appear, and so Be, only if others ‘light’ us up. To be lit up means to be seen from a vantage point from which we never see ourselves. It also means to embody not our own, but rather *someone else’s* idea of beauty. Our ‘essence’ is thus strangely nonessential.⁴⁰⁴

The larger project of *World Spectators* is a reassertion of an affinity between being and appearance, identifying the latter as the main sphere within which being emerges. But it is Silverman’s stress on the regard of others in processes of subject formation, rather than her general elevation of appearance, that is important here.

Crucially, visual interaction is an intersubjective interaction. And accountability rests with the viewer. While looking can ‘light up’ the other, ‘this does not mean that the look has the right to dispose freely of the world’. ‘It is as important to grasp’, Silverman clarifies, ‘what the look cannot or should not do as to understand what it can do’.⁴⁰⁵ This sense of the precariousness of visual interaction runs throughout Smith’s fiction. It accounts for why highly visual description can be both Smith’s preferred mode of characterization, and a target for scepticism at a thematic level. Locating responsibility as resting with firmly with the viewer untangles any such contradiction. A visual representational framework is not automatically problematic. Rather it is a question of what happens within this framework, of how it is deployed and negotiated. In the following concluding section, I outline how scenes in Smith’s fiction take on a didactic role in this regard.

⁴⁰³ Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators*, p. 19.

⁴⁰⁴ Silverman, *World Spectators*, p. 19.

⁴⁰⁵ Silverman, *World Spectators*, p. 19.

2.5 An Ethics of Vision

As the passages above tell us, for Smith, as for Silverman, visuality is an ethical space. In this final section of my reading of the author's work, I draw out further the ethical capacity of literary remediations of visual images and practices. Fictional scenes of visual interaction set out the intricacies of looking and representing: they establish how one might engage in these acts with appropriate respect for the viewed object or individual.

In 'Ethics in the Wake of the Image', Lewis S. Gleich discusses how American fiction might respond to the saturation, and subsequent exhaustion, of the image in the post-9/11 cultural landscape. Focusing on the work of Don DeLillo, Paul Auster, and Jonathan Safran Foer, Gleich argues that fiction can 'provide readers with strategies for resisting and undermining the oppressive force of the spectacle'. 'These novels', Gleich writes, 'show how literature can act as a counterforce to the spectacle by providing a space where characters and narrators respond to images with sustained dialogue rather than passive spectatorship'.⁴⁰⁶ My own study takes a similar line of enquiry. The focus is less on literary responses to spectacle and more on fiction's general conversation with contemporary visual culture. But, like Gleich, I understand novels to serve a didactic purpose in respect of the image. A literary text can show its reader how to negotiate an increasingly complex visual field by emulating this complexity internally.

Across Smith's novels we find exhortations that characters look properly, with the trope being symptomatic of a wider didactic impulse: 'it is important to look closely at things, especially difficult things', says Astrid in *The Accidental*.⁴⁰⁷ The same character's scrutiny of some grass elsewhere in the novel foregrounds looking's potential to offer up insight: 'She sits down in the shade by the door and looks hard at the greenness of the grass. If she looks hard enough she will maybe know or learn something about greenness or whatever'.⁴⁰⁸

As well as having a role internal to the text, these scenes impact on reader response. When taken collectively, they claim that visuality might be encountered in

⁴⁰⁶ Lewis S. Gleich, 'Ethics in the Wake of the Image: The Post-9/11 Fiction of DeLillo, Auster and Foer', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 37.3 (2014), 161-176 (pp. 162-163).

⁴⁰⁷ Smith, *The Accidental*, p. 18.

⁴⁰⁸ Smith, *The Accidental*, pp. 127-128.

the text. And they demand that an appropriate, visually attuned, reading practice follow. The final pages of George's narrative in *How to Be Both* read as a manifesto for close visual engagement. George outlines how at first glance, Francesco del Cossa's painting of Saint Vincent Ferrer is unremarkable. She lists reasons 'not to look', including the work's subject matter and its figure's severe aspect. But a long ekphrasis of the painting, and an endorsement of paying close attention, then follows. Smith's use of deictics and free indirect discourse give the impression that George is addressing her lively observations directly to the reader: 'But then you notice'; 'Then there's'; 'You can see'; 'Best of all'. A repeated 'look' demands that both characters and reader attend to the look of things.⁴⁰⁹

Further scenes set out the importance of honing visual sensitivity. Throughout *How to Be Both*, George's mother shows acute visual awareness: 'her mother did an art history degree once', George feels compelled to explain.⁴¹⁰ George describes her mother's interaction with first a reproduction, and then the original, of del Cossa's fresco in the Palazzo Schifanoia: 'at the seeing and liking so much of which her mother literally stopped being sad'. 'Seeing' comes first in this verb sequence, and throughout the passage Smith stresses sight: 'who happened last week to see'; 'see that picture for real'; 'look at pictures with me'.⁴¹¹ This emphasis implies that it is the act of viewing, rather than the object itself, that is transformative for George's mother.

Like offers a more pronounced example of art-induced transformative experience. Amy is an ex-academic. She has renounced her past, her literacy, and any intellectual curiosity. All three gradually return to her over the course of an Italian holiday. Smith gives Amy's regeneration a visual basis. Seeing volcanic ash reminds her of a friend's name. Frescoes in a Pompeian villa recall an academic past: 'she has seen these paintings before. She knows them by heart'.⁴¹² Smith stresses the appearance of these various triggers. Kate and Amy do little during this holiday narrative, but what they see is described in great detail: 'the pretty materials of civilization'; 'mosaics of fierce dogs'; 'really bright colours like orange and pink';

⁴⁰⁹ Smith, *The Accidental*, pp. 340-343.

⁴¹⁰ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 296.

⁴¹¹ Smith, *How to Be Both*, p. 233.

⁴¹² Smith, *Like*, p. 112.

‘delicate shapes of stars’; ‘light falls through the well-placed skylights and makes the room golden’.⁴¹³

The culmination of Amy’s awakening comes at Pompeii:

A fragment of card sticks to the damp concrete under the bench. It is a ripped-up part of the woman’s body, one of her feet. It is painted as if in a sandal, like the kind of sandal people still wear. It is very like a real foot. It is so like a real foot that Amy is shocked. She bends down, scrapes it up off the floor with her nail. She knows this panel of the wall quite well. She has studied it in dim libraries, she has read books about it, and articles, she has even written a lengthy paper on it and used slides of it in lectures in shaded lecture halls.⁴¹⁴

The image’s removal from its usual context encourages close consideration. At this moment, ‘when she sees it like this, ripped apart from itself’, it strikes Amy ‘how painfully like a foot the painter has taken the care to make it’.⁴¹⁵ Engaged looking affords new insight: it both recasts the viewed object and facilitates its viewer’s psychological transformation.

Similar moments of revised looking occur throughout this novel, as Smith outlines the benefits of re-viewing an object after the initial response. Ash, for instance, is about to destroy John Duncan’s painting of Saint Bride:

so I leaned it at an angle and got ready to jump on it. But then I saw. That the man who’d painted the picture had painted a frame around it, inside the real frame. That the bare foot of one of the angels was stretched out beyond the painted frame. That the wingtips of both angels were too, and even the wingtips of the gulls, like they were all about to soar airily out of the picture.⁴¹⁶

Violence quickly gives way to a consideration of the piece’s aesthetics, with the shift coming at ‘but then I saw’. The long ekphrasis stills this previously fast-paced scene. Ash reassesses the picture, as does the reader: Smith’s description transforms the artwork from a narrative prop into an object worthy of attention in its own right.

The novel continues to promote the rewards of close looking. One scene makes explicit Smith’s prose’s didactic potential in this respect. Amy teaches her daughter how to look properly:

⁴¹³ Smith, *Like*, pp. 101-110.

⁴¹⁴ Smith, *Like*, p. 115.

⁴¹⁵ Smith, *Like*, p. 115.

⁴¹⁶ Smith, *Like*, p. 290.

I've already looked at that one, Kate says.

No, look properly, Amy says. Look really closely. If you do, you can see where the colours come from.

Kate does an impatient face showing her bottom teeth. Then she leans up over the glass case to look again. Amy is right. If she looks really closely and carefully, she can see that the colours on the wings of the pinned-down butterfly are made out of the thinnest strands of hair, so thin you almost can't see them, and it is like the colour of a kind of dust balanced on the hairs, coating the outsides of them.⁴¹⁷

The passage's tutorial structure enfolds the reader's response. The reader's position aligns with Kate's, with Amy guiding both towards the relevant details. The merit of studied observation is clear. Kate's attention to the object seems all the more intense by contrast to her earlier refusal of it: 'it is just a collection of dead butterflies in glass cases'.⁴¹⁸ So with this in mind, her heightened consciousness appears rewarding in its own right. Looking 'properly', 'really closely and carefully' affords a realization of otherwise missed details.

By asking for a productive recasting of the original response, this kind of double take reaction argues against complacent looking. For Silverman, the double take is crucial in the development of an ethical looking practice:

Although we cannot control what happens to a perception before we become aware of it, we can retroactively revise the value which it assumes for us at a conscious level. We can look at an object a second time, through different representational parameters, and painstakingly reverse the processes through which we have arrogated to ourselves what does not belong to us, or displaced onto another what we do not want to recognise in ourselves. Although such re-viewing can have only a very limited efficacy, and must be repeated with each new visual perception, it is a necessary step in the coming of the subject into an ethical or nonviolent relation to the other.⁴¹⁹

As with the double takes in Smith's fiction, Silverman's retroactive looking involves a generous attentiveness to the given object. For Silverman, the act has a particularly important role to play in intersubjective relations. It allows for a view of the other that is open to reconsideration. On these terms, looking does not aim to displace or

⁴¹⁷ Smith, *Like*, p. 121.

⁴¹⁸ Smith, *Like*, p. 120.

⁴¹⁹ Silverman, *Threshold*, p. 3.

possess its object, but rather it tries to come to know it through revision and refinement.

Smith's fiction takes a similar stance. Scenes, discussed above, that set out the general benefits of close looking prepare the way for an exposition of attention's intersubjective potential. For instance, analysis of facial expression is central to George's realization of her brother's grief:

George opens her eyes. She's slumped on the floor leaning back against her own bed. Henry is in her bed. All the lights are on. She'd fallen asleep and now she's woken up.

Her mother is dead. It's 1.30 a.m. It's New Year.

There's a noise downstairs. It sounds like someone is at the front door. That's what woke her.

It will be her father.

Henry wakes up. His mother is dead too. She sees the knowledge cross his face about three seconds after he opens his eyes.⁴²⁰

The scene's mode of slow consideration is keyed to the measured, self-aware approach that Silverman sees as requisite for productive perception. George's careful detection and analysis of visual and auditory clues forms the predominant action. The narrative moves from the affective to the cognitive. Visual indicators – 'opens her eyes', 'sees' – prompt George to realize her position on the floor. And auditory clues – 'noise', 'sounds like' – are similarly the basis of further assumptions. Each clipped sentence unit represents a further step in George's thought process, with the quick transition from one to the other reiterating the general progression from the hearing of a sound to its analysis.

This passage's internal perceptive framework is akin to Silverman's revisionary viewing. Bodily affect must be put to rigorous contemplation before an understanding can be reached. Smith's use of time also corresponds to this: impressions are clearly put to a retroactive investigation. Single sentences encompass both past and present, as in 'she'd fallen asleep and now she's woken up'. The adverb 'now', along with a closing use of the present tense, jars with an initial use of the perfect. The final sentence expresses a similar temporal blurring.

⁴²⁰ Smith, *How to Be Both*, pp. 258-259.

Smith uses the present tense of ‘sees’ to express an action that, within the wider narrative progression of the passage, is actually said to have taken place ‘three seconds earlier’.

So an expression of keen sensory receptivity and an interest in the past’s continued revision within the present promote this passage as very much part of Silverman’s productive viewing economy. Its final paragraph secures this reading. Smith’s choice of pronoun in the penultimate sentence is informative. Rather than stating that ‘my mother is dead’, the sentence reads ‘his mother is dead’. The choice suggests that George adopts Henry’s perspective. She does not inscribe her own grief onto her brother’s face. Rather, for a moment, George forgoes or forgets her grief in order to recognise his; she acknowledges that Henry, as an individual in his own right, has lost his mother too. The surrounding narrative supports this sense of George’s selflessness. The passage’s initial description suggests dissociation or disembodiment. At first, George registers her position on the floor by means of what she can see. But then she goes on to describe herself as if from an external perspective: ‘she’s slumped on the floor leaning back against her own bed’. Her free-ranging gaze allows for the possibility that her later contemplation of Henry might be similarly decentred, and not projective.

So Silverman’s account of an ethical looking practice helps us to read scenes in Smith’s fiction as demonstrative of vision’s productive potential. Such scenes set out a counternarrative to those in which visual representation figures less favourably in the author’s work. That is, Smith’s fiction does not aim at an uncomplicated, affirmative rendering of visual interaction and representation’s workings. Its interest lies instead in the nuances of the visual field and in the difficulties of its negotiation. So as to make the visual’s ethical capacity clear, its inverse must also have a place. In this manner, Smith’s presentation of alternative contrasting scenarios stresses the difficulty of acceding to, but ultimate benefit of, a generous mode of vision. And George’s reading of her brother’s expression suggests that attending to another’s face can show great promise in this respect.

In ‘The Commitment to Look’, Mieke Bal rereads Silverman’s work with the aim of setting out the place for politics in visual studies. Bal outlines how the field runs the

risk of simply paying ‘lip service’ to politics and ethics.⁴²¹ The issue is, Bal suggests, the incorrect assumption that the ethical is immanent to discussions of vision, rather than something that must be put there through rigorous theorization and analysis. Bal considers how visual studies deploy discourses of the face. She outlines, as an example, how a study’s claim for an ethical position might take the form of no more than a brief reference to Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of the ‘face-to-face’. Having made the claim, such a study would then move on without properly engaging with the particulars of the given concept.

In cautioning against ‘the conflation of the *slogan* of the face-to-face with an ethics of vision’, Bal advocates a renewed attention to mutuality in any discussion of face-to-face relations.⁴²² Vision’s ethical potential, for Bal, pivots on the issue of mutuality:

The fact that seeing comes with being seen, the ways in which this happens and the resistance against it, raises issues that lie at the heart of visual studies. The yes or no of mutuality constitutes perhaps the most influential question in a *political* visual study, where voyeurism, pornography, an othering that eroticizes people, attraction and repulsion, stereotyping and self-styling are under scrutiny, as are the complexities of memory, the possibility to re-envision the past within present culture – which I call preposterous history – and the heterochrony of seeing and being seen. What is at stake here is the interplay or even the politics of, roughly and simplistically, two kinds of visual events: the objectifying subjection and the mutuality or ‘face-to-face’.⁴²³

So the contrast is between an oppressive look and a look that acknowledges its own visibility, and necessary vulnerability. Smith’s fiction similarly draws out the importance of mutuality in any ethical visual interaction. As with George’s re-viewing of a pornography clip or her consideration of Henry’s waking face, productive looking comes about when Smith’s characters are aware of their own emplacement and responsibility within the given viewing economy.

A scene in *There but for the* instructs how reciprocity might imbue a visual interaction. A painting serves as the guide:

⁴²¹ Mieke Bal, ‘The Commitment to Look’, *Journal of Visual Culture*, 4.2 (2005), 145-162 (p. 145).

⁴²² Bal, ‘The Commitment to Look’, p. 151.

⁴²³ Bal, ‘The Commitment to Look’, p. 150.

The picture is a holy picture, a religious picture, of two men. They are turned towards each other and a group of men is watching them. One has his arm, his hand, on the other's shoulders. He is looking at the man lovingly. The smaller of the two men is bending forward slightly. He is putting his fingers, his hand, right inside a wound in the first man's side.

Beautiful, a man behind him says.

It is the man from inside the shop. He has come outside and is standing next to Mark. Mark says yes, he thinks it is really beautiful.⁴²⁴

Mutuality works through the passage in several ways. Firstly, the image itself expresses it. Mark is looking at a representation of doubting Thomas's interaction with the newly resurrected Christ. The Gospel of Saint John tells of Thomas's scepticism upon hearing of the resurrection: 'Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe'.⁴²⁵ Popular in Medieval and Renaissance art, typical depictions of the event generally stress the acts of looking and touching. Similarly, here Smith's focus is with the senses and the directness of experience that they afford. Sight has a prominent place: the figures are 'watching' and 'looking'. And there is a like stress on tactility: Thomas puts his fingers 'right inside' the wound. Such details establish an environment of participation. Contact, both visual and physical, determines the interaction.

This sense of contact extends beyond the inset ekphrasis, coding the novel's wider narrative. Raymond's comment, 'beautiful', interrupts Mark's reverie. The remark shows that Raymond too has been looking at the picture. And Raymond has also, it becomes clear, been looking at Mark. With this, Mark's position switches from viewer to viewed. And we find this doubling, a reminder of 'the fact that seeing comes with being seen', replicated in the viewed painting: Thomas looks at Christ, while others are also 'watching them'.⁴²⁶

This essential state of 'being seen', and its importance for intersubjective relations, finds its fullest expression in Sartre's chapter on the look in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre instructs his reader to picture a scenario: 'let us imagine that moved by jealousy, or curiosity, or vice I have just glued my ear to the door and

⁴²⁴ Smith, *There but for the*, pp. 176-177.

⁴²⁵ John 20. 19-27.

⁴²⁶ Bal, 'The Commitment to Look', p. 150.

looked through a keyhole.⁴²⁷ In this situation, the subject is initially undetermined and loosely positioned: ‘I am alone and on the level of a non-thetic self-consciousness’.⁴²⁸ By this, Sartre means that there is no external force to anchor the subject. He explains how ‘there is no self to inhabit my consciousness, nothing therefore to which I can refer my acts in order to qualify them’. Essentially, there is no ‘outside’ to give shape to the subject, or to which it might bear a meaningful, locatable position: ‘I cannot truly define myself as *being* in a situation: first because I am not in a positional consciousness of myself; second because I am my own nothingness’.⁴²⁹

The entrance of another person, however, significantly changes the situation:

But all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me! What does this mean? It means that I am suddenly affected in my being and that essential modifications appear in my structure – modifications which I can apprehend and fix conceptually by means of the reflective *cogito*. First of all, I now exist as *myself* for my unreflective consciousness. It is this irruption of the self which has been most often described: I see *myself* because *somebody* sees me – as it is usually expressed.⁴³⁰

The sensation of being seen makes an individual aware of himself or herself. And this visually constituted self-awareness is the aspect that most often attracts comment. But for Sartre, ‘this way of putting it is not wholly exact’.⁴³¹ The point is that such an interaction does not prompt self-awareness in isolation. Rather it specifically prompts an awareness of the self for, or in the eyes of, the other. So this is predominantly about intersubjectivity, rather than about the formation of an individual subject: ‘all of a sudden I am conscious of myself as escaping myself, not in that I am the foundation of my own nothingness but that I have my foundation outside myself. I am for myself only as I am a pure reference to the Other’.⁴³² The situation transforms the subject’s relation both to the other, and to the world as a

⁴²⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel Barnes (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 282-283.

⁴²⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 283.

⁴²⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 283.

⁴³⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 284.

⁴³¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 284.

⁴³² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 284.

whole: ‘to apprehend myself as seen is, in fact, to apprehend myself as seen *in the world* and from the standpoint of the world’.⁴³³

Returning to the passage from *There but for the* with Sartre’s keyhole analogy in mind, we find that the scene expresses a similarly transformative interaction. For it outlines how a subject might come into a relation with the world, and another, by means of looking and being looked at. Smith’s narrative hyperbolizes this sense of interpersonal contact. Initially, it does so by means of its chosen picture. Sensuality – touching and gazing – is a key component of the painting. As the narrative continues, it spells out this aspect more explicitly: ‘there, in a woody part, on a foggy day in London town, things come to a pretty pass. Somewhere between roughness and gentility the man, who is very beautiful, kisses him so thoroughly that when Mark gets back to the place he’s supposed to meet Kenna an hour later he is flushed and new, a whole new person’.⁴³⁴

The interrelation or comparability of the visual encounter and its subsequent physical counterpart is clear. The second episode’s organization associates it with the former. There is a mirroring of figures: two men are the principal players in both the described painting and the fictional narrative. ‘Beautiful’ is said firstly of the picture, later of Raymond. This shared vocabulary conveys the interaction’s impact on Mark: ‘it is as if his eyes have changed, as if all the colours in everything he sees are golden and ancient and new’.⁴³⁵ Ostensibly this simile describes the effect of physical contact. Yet its chosen mode of expression immediately brings to mind the preceding description of that ‘golden-coloured, medieval-looking picture’.⁴³⁶ Both ‘golden’ and ‘ancient’ invoke the earlier image. And the passage makes clear that Mark’s awakening is emphatically an optical experience: ‘his eyes have changed’. Taken as a whole, this narrative section recounts the extent to which visual experience can reflect and produce intersubjective experience.

By way of conclusion I return to ‘The Commitment to Look’, Bal’s discussion of the relationship between visual studies and ethics. In her final comments, Bal refers to

⁴³³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 287.

⁴³⁴ Smith, *There but for the*, p. 177.

⁴³⁵ Smith, *There but for the*, p. 177.

⁴³⁶ Smith, *There but for the*, p. 176.

the work from which her own essay takes its name, Homi K. Bhabha's 'The Commitment to Theory':

In one of its etymological senses, this noun refers to the act of seeing-through. If we consider seeing through not as overlooking surfaces to rush to depth but as dwelling on what the domain of visibility offers by way of urgent and emergent philosophical thought, including on how to halt to see the overlooked, Bhabha's injunction to commit to theory can be translated into a commitment to look. For me, it is that commitment that lies at the heart of visual studies. That alone can enable the field to make a difference.⁴³⁷

Bal advocates for theory the same close looking practice that Smith's prose generally promotes. Her point is that the formulation of an ethics of vision, with its accompanying emphasis on attention and commitment, demands a suitably attentive theoretical approach. Ethics, on this reading, acts as a practical model for theory. The suggestion is that commitment in visual studies can impact upon the wider viewing culture, with close attention to the theorized image or text carrying a political weight that extends beyond the academic context.

Smith's fiction expresses a similar affinity between theory and practice. Her novels tell of the benefits of looking closely and offer themselves up readily to just such a critical approach. Intricate visual detailing and exhortations to 'look!' demand a committed approach towards the image. And by this I mean a committed approach that is not localized to the reading experience, but is instead applicable more widely. For as Smith's prose guides its reader through an exposition of the visual field's tropes and tendencies, it provides a template for a negotiation of that field, beyond its textual context. In this respect, the author's work's close technical remediation of aspects of visual representation and experience is key. As by emulating aspects of the other medium, Smith's prose increases its expository value in respect of the visual: it seeks to demonstrate the image's workings, rather than to simply explain them.

So for both theorist and author, close consideration – whether of the visual image, the theorized object, or of another individual – is imperative. And it is from this that my own study takes its direction. In the next chapter, I continue to set out what a visually attuned close reading practice might look like. My target is the treatment of visuality in Oyeyemi's fiction, and of particular interest is how the

⁴³⁷ Bal, 'The Commitment to Look', p. 160.

author uses literary description as a space to test out and critique the ways in which racial identity typically registers in the visual sphere. In this author's work surfaces, as Bal suggests, are not to be overlooked. They invite close consideration in their own right, and they assert that surface and depth – far from existing on a spectrum – are in fact mutually constitutive. My point is that surfaces, in so far as they are able to carry the thematic and theoretical weight of a given novel, must be dwelt in order to get at that text's depth.

3.1 The Centrality of Description

As I outlined in the introduction to this study, Oyeyemi's fiction is, at first glance, less concerned with visual culture than the work of either Cole or Smith. Unlike Cole, this writer is not also a photographer. Unlike Smith, Oyeyemi does not populate her stories with artists and paintings, either real or imagined. She has declared no interest in making the structure of her novels follow fresco form.⁴³⁸ Yet in many ways, it is this quality that makes my study of Oyeyemi's work the most important of the three cases. Looking closely at Oyeyemi's work can tell us how a text engages with and replicates aspects of its surrounding visual field, even if its author does not explicitly enlist it to do so. My point is that texts articulate the visual not on account of authorial intention, but on account of their placement within and emergence out of a wider cultural environment. More specifically, this is a cultural environment in which images and visual debates predominate. In this chapter, I want to focus more on how Oyeyemi's prose carries the latter than the former, as I hope to add further detail to some of the theoretical issues that have surfaced across this study as a whole.

Having said this, basic indications of visibility are readily available across the surfaces of Oyeyemi's novels. The author calls on the literal image as a way to colour and structure textual description. While such uses do not accede to the sustained remediations of Cole's or Smith's work, they do succeed in lending her prose a determinedly visual vocabulary and outlook. Her description, for instance, is sensitive to colour and contrast. The author specifies tones; eyes show up as a particular 'shade of grey', faces appear 'mottled pink and white'.⁴³⁹ As I will describe later, colour also works in an important theoretical capacity for Oyeyemi.

Sensitivity both to the look of things and to the act of looking itself continues to feature throughout these narratives. In *The Icarus Girl*, Jess watches a man who watches her:

⁴³⁸ Ali Smith interviewed by Alex Clark, *Guardian*, 6 September 2014.

⁴³⁹ Helen Oyeyemi, *White is for Witching* (London: Picador, 2009), p. 1, p. 7.

The light colours contrasted with his skin, and he stood out in gaunt relief against his cream-coloured car, like a paper cut-out. He was looking at her, but in a distracted manner, as if she was something to look at while he waited for something else.⁴⁴⁰

In this example an interest in colour is coupled with the specification of a very particular kind of looking. First, Jess notes distraction in a man's look. And then, crucially, she offers the reader an illustrative comparison.

Like the other two authors, Oyeyemi also puts visual art examples and techniques to use in specific analogies. In *Boy, Snow, Bird*, for instance, images in a mirror appear as 'faces chasing each other like photographic slides when someone's trying to show you their vacation in a hurry'.⁴⁴¹ This specificity serves to outline both the look of these mirror images, and the experience of viewing them. Recourse to a photographic analogy in this instance makes the quickness and discreteness of the passing faces easily graspable. Throughout, this novel similarly incorporates non-textual media forms into its figurative framework. Boy invokes film to explain a particular look:

It's just that sometimes you get this look... you know how in movies people come around after fainting or hitting their head and immediately start asking, 'Who am I? Where am I? Who are *you*? I've seen you looking like that sometimes.'⁴⁴²

The analogy aims to provide a clear image for the fictional interlocutor. But, more importantly, this is a look that Oyeyemi's reader will also know well. A reference to pointillism in *The Icarus Girl* offers up a similar – that is, an instantly graspable – impression. 'There was a moment of pointillism', Oyeyemi writes, 'her vision swimming out of clarity and into a group of coloured dots, then reforming again'.⁴⁴³ This reference to a particular painting technique allows prose to transmit succinctly the nature of Jess's dizziness. Again, the allusion's efficacy relies on the assumption that the reader will recognise this aesthetic.

⁴⁴⁰ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 15.

⁴⁴¹ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 157.

⁴⁴² Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 104.

⁴⁴³ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 167.

The following extract from *White is for Witching* provides a more sustained example of how Oyeyemi's prose calls on the visual to structure and supplement its own workings. Eliot describes the pose of his sister, Miranda:

In the morning Miri was sitting up, her arms stiff on the bedspreads before her, gone so deep into sleep that she seemed part of the wall behind her, a girl-shaped texture rising from the plaster in an unrepeated pattern. Her braid was unravelling. Her lips were pinched, her forehead lined with effort.⁴⁴⁴

Certain vocabulary choices – 'shaped', 'texture', 'pattern' – present Miranda as a specifically visual form for appraisal. The description reads as an ekphrasis, with the text describing the girl as if she had already been translated into an art object.

In the first instance, it is the scene's physical organization that supports such a reading. But I also want to draw attention to how this compositional logic calls forth a very particular kind of gaze. Miranda's arrangement on the bed brings to mind a recognisable type: that of the reclining Venus in the Western painting tradition. In these paintings, a female figure, which was traditionally Venus and later an odalisque, is offered up wholly to the viewer. The perspective is generally straight on and the figure is often sleeping, framed by a bed. Early examples of the form, such as Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*, are not sexualized.⁴⁴⁵ Pleasure resides simply in the act of looking in on the unaware figure. Later models, by contrast, are more overtly erotic; in these images the form shifts from encouraging basic scopophilia, to licensing voyeurism.

Traces of the earlier tradition, I think, can be read from Oyeyemi's description above. This textual description borrows from visual stereotype in order to achieve its impact. By placing Miranda in this open position, and by putting her to sleep, the description makes her fully available both to the narrator, and the reader. And it also allows for an impression of weakness. This impression, brought forth at this early stage in the novel, serves to establish and reiterate character. Miranda, we learn in these initial pages, is ill: 'Miranda can't come in today Miranda has a *condition* called pica she has eaten a great deal of chalk – she really can't help

⁴⁴⁴ Oyeyemi, *White is for Witching* (London: Picador, 2010), p. 7.

⁴⁴⁵ Giorgione, *Sleeping Venus*, c. 1510, oil on canvas, 108.5 x 175 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.

herself – she has been very ill – *Miranda has pica she can't come in* today'.⁴⁴⁶ Oyeyemi's chosen visual model helps her to stress her subject's passivity. In such a tableau, the figure is typically inactive and appears vulnerable. Closed eyes, nudity, or an unguarded position reiterate this lack of control to varying degrees, depending on the image in question. In this sense, the author's recourse to this particular visual form is apposite to, and even establishes, the tone of the subsequent narrative. Miranda remains a passive character throughout the novel: her story is told in turns by a third person narrator, by her brother, and by her friend.

In her essay 'Over-Writing as Un-Writing: Descriptions, World-Making, and Novelistic Time', Mieke Bal also reads for traces of this pictorial form in prose description. In this particular reading, Bal makes a slightly different point to my own one above. But I think that her essay and this thesis share an overarching aim. Bal explains how a description of Robin Vote in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* recalls the look of a painted odalisque: 'Presenting the future object of obsessive pursuit – and the subject of obsessive withdrawal – as lying on a bed, the passage presents itself not only as a view from above but also as a traditional painting'.⁴⁴⁷

A series of descriptive features drive this reading. In the first instance, Barnes explicitly likens Robin to 'a painting by the *douanier* Rousseau'.⁴⁴⁸ The description's ornamentation, composition, and overall mood bear this impression out. For Bal, suggestions of orientalism inhere in the description's 'potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers'.⁴⁴⁹ They remind us of 'the paraphernalia of the late nineteenth-century artist's studio'; that of Matisse comes to mind in particular.⁴⁵⁰ In this way the fact of representation, and specifically visual representation, comes to

⁴⁴⁶ Oyeyemi, *White is for Witching*, p. 3.

⁴⁴⁷ Mieke Bal, 'Over-Writing as Un-Writing: Descriptions, World-Making, and Novelistic Time', in *A Mieke Bal Reader*, by Mieke Bal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 96-148 (p. 100).

⁴⁴⁸ Bal, 'Over-Writing as Un-Writing', p. 99. Presumably, it is Rousseau's *Le Rêve* that Barnes has in mind. In this painting, a naked woman lies on a divan amidst a tropical jungle setting; Henri Rousseau, *Le Rêve*, 1910, oil on canvas, 204.5 cm x 298.5 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

⁴⁴⁹ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), qtd. in Bal, 'Over-Writing as Un-Writing', p. 100. Bal might have in mind Matisse's *Odalisque, Harmony in Red* (1926-1927) or his *Reclining Odalisque* (1926).

⁴⁵⁰ Bal, 'Over-Writing as Un-Writing', p. 100

the fore in this passage. The perspective reproduced here is also important. The description's focalizer looks down on the subject, who is passive and appears vulnerable. A sense of intimacy, but also of voyeurism, runs through the passage. All of this depends on prose's recreation of a particular visual form.

Bal offers this passage from *Nightwood* as a *mise-en-abyme* for the wider argument that she makes in her essay. She suggests that by 'ranging from expansion to ekphrasis, disorder to distraction, and deceleration to intensification of the moment', Barnes's 'description contains in a nutshell the history, the theory, and the criticism of description'.⁴⁵¹ The historical element stems from this description's eclecticism; in recalling diverse elements of both the literary and pictorial representational traditions, this 'description's polyphony inscribes episodes of cultural and literary history within a single frame'.⁴⁵²

Barnes's scene also tells us how novelistic description, far from being simple ornamentation, can actually drive the narrative. Quite literally, this picture of Robin on the bed sets the narrative in motion; this is the moment of Robin and Felix's first meeting. And it also drives the narrative more locally; the 'intensification of the focalizer's perception together with the narrative expansion of the moment prepares the reader for a heightened sense of suspense, giving anticipatory importance to what will come'.⁴⁵³ So while the considered extract in one sense interrupts or slows the narrative, it also propels the narrative and replicates this onward movement internally. The visual dynamic between Robin and Felix as set out here makes it 'predictable', Bal thinks, 'that in terms of *relationship*, their case is hopeless'.⁴⁵⁴ This description, therefore, both initiates and condemns their relationship: 'Thus it comprises the time of the novel, including the body of its fabula, which is none other than the repetition of the failure to relate, as is staged here'.⁴⁵⁵ By drawing out description's potential and its paradoxes in this way, Bal introduces her theory of a 'description-bound narratology of the novel'.⁴⁵⁶

Bal's wider argument is that description deserves to occupy a more central and more carefully considered place in narrative theory than it currently does.

⁴⁵¹ Bal, 'Over-Writing as Un-Writing', p. 100.

⁴⁵² Bal, 'Over-Writing as Un-Writing', p. 100.

⁴⁵³ Bal, 'Over-Writing as Un-Writing', p. 100

⁴⁵⁴ Bal, 'Over-Writing as Un-Writing', p.100

⁴⁵⁵ Bal, 'Over-Writing as Un-Writing', p.101

⁴⁵⁶ Bal, 'Over-Writing as Un-Writing', p. 96

Narrative theory, Bal points out, has typically consigned description to the margins. Description is generally figured as a supplement in the Derridean sense; it contributes to, but also stands slight apart from, the narrative. Bal argues against any such approach that would distinguish description from the narrative ‘proper’. For her, descriptive form is a natural part of the novel’s discussion, and as integral a feature as the representation of action. Description, Bal argues, claims its integrality by means of deixis. It is deictic in the sense that, through the construction of an intricate representational framework, description replicates, points at, and binds together key threads of the novel in which it features. As a subset of this wider operation, we can also attribute an apodeictic and a metadeictic function to description. The former term expresses description’s ability to ‘demonstrate what novels are’.⁴⁵⁷ The latter means that while description might tell us how novels work, it also serves to emphasise the artificiality of this working.

My own readings of contemporary fiction interact with, and add to, Bal’s argument. Both want to draw attention to novelistic description and to claim it as a threshold onto wider concerns. For Bal, description operates in a predominantly self-referential and explanatory capacity; it tells us how narrative works. My own point is at once narrower and broader than this. In the first instance, as I hope my readings of Cole and Smith have shown, descriptive moments serve to point up the workings and thematic concerns specific to a given novel. But more widely, novelistic description in general is also the initial point of contact between a literary text and the wider cultural, and specifically visual, field. Looking at how a text’s visual surface registers the influence of this looking environment is, therefore, the first step to understanding how novel form can reflect back at us, and critique, our contemporary visual culture.

In the sections that follow, I put Oyeyemi’s fiction to use in illustration of this wider point. Firstly, I consider how race shows up in her work as a specifically visual concern. Like Cole’s fiction, Oyeyemi’s work exposes race’s uneasy relationship with vision and visual representation. It also tells us that textual evocations of visuality, in the sense that they are more flexible than the literary

⁴⁵⁷ Bal, ‘Over-Writing as Un-Writing’, p. 97

image, are adept at showing and analysing how race typically comes into view. The following two sections have a more positive stance. Their shared point is that fiction, while it is alive to the visual field's limitations, can also draw out the possibilities of interacting and representing within such a field. As in the previous two chapters, I am interested in particular in how the contemporary novel understands and communicates the ethical potential of looking.

3.2 Race and Colour

As in Cole's work, Oyeyemi's visually interested prose operates as a space within which to consider one aspect of visibility in particular; the role that it plays in relation to race. My aim for this section is to develop my suggestion that any investigation into how race works is necessarily also a consideration of how the acts of looking and depicting work. I stress that, for the fiction of both of these authors, the fictional treatment of race is a subset of a wider investigation into the workings of vision and visual representation more generally. And my focus remains on how well literary description is suited to relay and explain the workings of both.

Race relies on two visual acts for its constitution and its cementation: perception and representation. Being fixed as a racialized subject, as Fanon tells us, comes about by way of being seen and articulated as such by another.⁴⁵⁸ Matthew Pratt Guterl's *Seeing Race in Modern America* summarizes the history of race and vision's imbrication, and outlines how racialized visual practices inhere in contemporary American culture. It begins 'with a discriminating look', Pratt Guterl writes, 'a calculated assessment of the tone of the skin, or the texture of the hair, or the shape of the face'.⁴⁵⁹ This 'racial look' has a long history, played out across cultures and media forms: '[w]ithin the modern age, faith in the eye's capacity to discern racial difference can be traced to the beginning of contact between Europe, Africa, and Asia, if not before. One could follow it forward, through the first fantastic travelogues, into the human sciences, into art, lithography, printing, illustration, filmmaking, and still photography'.⁴⁶⁰

Essentially, race is a matter of perception and representation. We might parse it as 'the story', Pratt Guterl suggests, 'of the everyday assessment, or scan, of the body as text, and the culturally informed interpretation of the signs and symbols seen in the profile, the posture and the comportment of a person's carriage'.⁴⁶¹ As such, the recognition of race functions in way similar to that of other visually reliant identity attributions, with gender being the obvious example. I draw attention to this because I think that the respective representations of racial looking in Cole's and

⁴⁵⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 112.

⁴⁵⁹ Matthew Pratt Guterl, *Seeing Race in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), p. 2.

⁴⁶⁰ Pratt Guterl, *Seeing Race*, pp. 2-3.

⁴⁶¹ Pratt Guterl, *Seeing Race* p. 3.

Oyeyemi's texts echo aspects of Smith's fiction's own examination into the relationship between representation and identity. Smith's work is more explicitly concerned with how femininity comes to be constituted in the visual field, than with race. But the issues and strategies that her fiction sets out – essentialism, stereotype, performance, and fluidity – might equally be directed at a critique of racial representation.

Pratt Guterl's analysis of how race works in modern America aims at conveying the diversity of visual practices through which race is constituted. The aim is to direct attention away from the standard consideration of colour, and to focus instead on the diverse modes of picturing that produce and concretize race. Focusing on 'theme, genre and pattern', rather than just on skin tone, draws out the nuances of racial picturing. This approach exposes how race variously 'emerges when the body is scanned in profile, in silhouette, or in relation, or in a set series of assemblages and juxtapositions, or when a form is marked by hybridity, ambiguity, subterfuge, and masquerade'.⁴⁶²

Pratt Guterl's attention to these visual habits, or 'sightlines', provides a useful point of departure for my consideration of how literary description conveys the workings of race as visual practice. I will show how Oyeyemi's characters exploit, in particular, the racialized body's potential for ambiguity or masquerade. Textual description, on this count, operates as a malleable space within which to represent, but also to undermine, practices of racial attribution.

Pratt Guterl's study is representative of a number of critical works that map out race's reliance on and relay through vision and visual representation. W. J. T. Mitchell's *Seeing Through Race*, for instance, takes the line that race operates as a perceptual and cognitive filter:

My proposal is that we see race as a *medium*, an intervening substance, to take the most literal definition. Race, in other words, is something we *see through*, like a frame, a window, a screen, or a lens, rather than something we *look at*. It is a repertoire of cognitive and conceptual filters through which forms of human otherness are mediated. It is a costume, a mask, or a masquerade that can be put on, played upon, and disavowed.⁴⁶³

⁴⁶² Pratt Guterl, *Seeing Race*, p. 12.

⁴⁶³ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Seeing Through Race* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. xiii.

Race, as Mitchell understands it, is a guiding framework for cognition. It is less a stable construct, more a representational arena within which we view and bring forth others. Like Pratt Guterl, Mitchell touches on race's affinity with masquerade. As I will outline later, Oyeyemi's fiction also shows an interest in this theatrical aspect of racial representation.

While both of these studies lend my own work a vocabulary and workable framework with which to consider race as representation, I also see a limitation to their approach. Aside from a mutual interest in race's visual component, Pratt Guterl's and Mitchell's works both refuse any suggestion of a 'post-racial era'. Far from being obsolete, they argue, race remains a salient form of identity organization. My own study does not dispute this. The case for race's continued 'realness' is a persuasive one. Linda Martín Alcoff makes it particularly well. 'There is a visual registry operating in social relations', she writes, 'which is socially constructed, historically evolving and culturally variegated but nonetheless powerfully determinant over individual experiences and choices'.⁴⁶⁴ The point is that racial categories play a concrete role in forming subjectivity, in societal organization, and in political policy.

Pratt Guterl, Mitchell, and Alcoff suggest that attending closely to the specifics of how race works is the first necessary step in understanding the construct's impact and persistence. My worry is that such an approach risks being simply descriptive, rather than actively constructive. It tells us that race plays out largely in visual terms. It tells us how race impacts upon, even shapes, lived reality. But it does not tell us how to challenge or move beyond this condition. My suggestion is that contemporary art practices and products, in which category I include the literary text, can step in to fill this gap. Not only can a literary description or a performance art piece, for instance, reflect the workings of race back at us, they can also stage some counter strategies in this respect. On these terms, a given art work stands both as a record of, and a challenge to, its wider visual environment.

In pursuing this line of enquiry in relation to Oyeyemi's fiction, I look to Alessandra Raengo's study of how visual art engages with and represents race for direction. In *On the Sleeve of the Visual*, Raengo attends to a series of art objects, including photographs, films, and collages. For Raengo, the value of these works is

⁴⁶⁴ Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 194.

that they both reflect and query the way in which race typically registers in the visual field:

These objects have challenged their status by pivoting on themselves, returning the gaze, cutting a figure. They have done so in a variety of ways – through deferral, excision, magnification, germination; by overlaying; by repeating with a difference; by instituting a wedge between identity and the identical; by scrambling and reconfiguring the relationship between surface and depth; by forcing a gap and inhabiting the space in between the surface and depth; and ultimately by nourishing the gap between visible and visual. As much as the blackness of the black body is the result of a fixation and an outward fold, the objects discussed manage to interrupt the racial fold and reverse its direction and, in the process, turn the visual field inside out.⁴⁶⁵

I want to consider how textual renderings of race might also deploy some of the strategies that Raengo outlines above. The aim is to draw out how a novel's descriptive and thematic investigations into race can relay how race works, while simultaneously enacting a challenge to such workings. Most of Raengo's chosen examples are visual objects. I want to ask whether the novel, itself a non-visual medium, might be equally well placed to approach the visual issues that attach to race. In fact, my suggestion is that textual representation actually might be able to go beyond its visual counterparts in this respect. Prose's non-standard viscosity can be to its advantage; while able to remediate visual representations of race through textual means, it is not tied to, and so not compromised by, the literal image.

Firstly, I want to look at what Oyeyemi's fiction does with colour. Writing has no colour. But it can, through adjectival choices and descriptive tropes, tell us how colour operates. *Boy, Snow, Bird* is interested in racism in 1950s America. The plot turns on a key revelation; that the Whitman family, who live as white, are in fact only 'passing' as such. The act of racial passing effectively undoes any clear correspondence between skin colour and identity. While black and white stand at opposite poles, those whose skin tone falls in the middle of this scale can lay claim to either category. Throughout, Oyeyemi's descriptive choices replicate this ambiguity.

⁴⁶⁵ Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual*, p. 163.

In the first instance, adjectives and figures of speech that express colour abound in this novel. 'Don't tell me who to cry for and who not to cry for', Phoebe tells Sidonie, 'Dark girl like you talking as though you're the top. You've got a face like a bowl of goddamned molasses'.⁴⁶⁶ Here, Phoebe's interaction with Sidonie takes its cue from Sidonie's 'darkness'. A follow-up simile, in which skin colour figures as treacle, stresses that Sidonie's perceived lower status comes about by way of her darker skin colour.

Further instances lay more explicit claim to colour's categorizing function. In these examples, colour works less as a basic outward sign of race, as it did above, and more as a comprehensive classificatory form. Again, Sidonie is the object of consideration: 'Sidonie Fairfax had a goofy laugh, but when her face was at rest, it was imperious. There's a certain type of colored girl who speaks softly and carries herself well, but when you talk to her her eyes firmly reject every word that comes out of your mouth'.⁴⁶⁷ As before, it is appearance that forms the basis of a character assessment, as the description plays over her imperious face, her dismissive eyes. Of most significance is the use of one term in particular: type. The noun's classificatory function implies that individuals of shared skin colour also share wider characteristics. It locates Sidonie as part of a distinctive group, of which skin colour is only the initial indicator. Skin colour here enables grouping or stereotype.

The narrative section that follows further outlines how this grouping impulse works. Boy's internal dialogue voices what she imagines to be the Whitman family's attitude towards Sidonie:

Sidonie likes the bookstore too, because nobody gives her a hard time there. White girls don't spill ink all over her dress at the bookstore, and colored boys don't twist her arm behind her back, and nobody stands in her way just leering like crazy when all she wants to do is walk down the corridor. That's the kind of girl that exists out there, less than a mile from those linen curtains. But if you saw her without talking to her, she'd make you paranoid in a way that only a colored girl can make a white woman paranoid. That unreadable look they give us; it's really shocking somehow, isn't it?⁴⁶⁸

Again, vocabulary choices locate skin colour as a marker of types. Boy tags Sidonie 'that kind of girl', as her colour allows her to stand in for a whole group of girls.

⁴⁶⁶ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 81.

⁴⁶⁷ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 79.

⁴⁶⁸ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, pp. 76-77.

Sidonie is not the only one to be sorted in this way; ‘white girls’, ‘colored boys’, and the ‘white woman’ are similarly marked out. The alternate white-black rhythm of the adjectives in this passage, by which those of contrasting colour are placed in antagonistic relation to each other, demarcates the given groups. Here, and throughout the novel, race is seeable, with colour playing an instrumental role in the process of attribution.

This focus on colour and categorization at a descriptive level apparently jars with the thematic content of Oyeyemi’s novel. *Boy, Snow, Bird*, through its exploration of racial passing, effectively critiques the idea that race attaches to a stable image. *Passing as* either white or black relies on *being seen as* either white or black. In my introduction to this study, I mentioned Glenn Ligon’s 1998 diptych, *Self Portrait Exaggerating My Black Features/Self Portrait Exaggerating My White Features*. I explained how, for Alessandra Raengo, Ligon’s photographs ‘demand that we read the same features alternatively *as* black and *as* white, thus positing the black body as a sort of duck-rabbit figure – an optical illusion’. And in this way, his work ‘makes apparent that seeing is always seeing *as*’.⁴⁶⁹ *Passing*, by which the same body appears either as white or as black depending on the given viewing context, can be read in similar terms. The act suggests that a racialized appearance is something to be taken on, and discarded, at will. In this sense, it devalues the relationship between appearance and identity when it comes to discerning race; the way in which we see race is socially constructed, very often projective, and so also open to manipulation.

Oyeyemi’s characters gesture at this phantasmagoric or projective element to race: ‘He asked if I’d have married him if I’d seen him as colored’; ‘Now that I knew about her it was incredible that I hadn’t seen it before’; ‘I used to assume that when I’m with colored people the similarities become obvious, but I guess it’s something people don’t see unless they’re looking to see it’.⁴⁷⁰ Oyeyemi’s fiction, like Ligon’s panels, draws attention to, and queries, ‘the expectation that the black body would work as one sign, one perfect image’.⁴⁷¹ This critique is, of course, clearest in her work’s thematic treatment of racial passing. But it can also be read off the descriptive surface of *Boy, Snow, Bird*. In fact, far from being inconsistent with the

⁴⁶⁹ Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual*, p. 1.

⁴⁷⁰ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*; *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 133, p. 134, p. 232.

⁴⁷¹ Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual*, p. 1.

novel's wider point, I think that a descriptive focus on colour and categorization is a key player in getting this point across.

By placing descriptive emphasis on adjectives to do with colour and on clichéd expressions of darkness, Oyeyemi's text draws attention to the way in which race tends to register in the visual field. Reading these formulations in the most straightforward way, the reader comes to understand that, generally, race is an operation of the image. But as the narrative progresses, characters that once came into view in a semantic context of whiteness now begin to attract contrasting adjectives. The cumulative effect of this is to make each designation, and corresponding cluster of descriptive terms, less meaningful. The categorization of a given individual as either white or black no longer carries weight, as the reader realises that the label might easily shift depending on the context.

So like Ligon's photograph, Oyeyemi's prose leverages the gap between racial sign and value. My question now is whether textual description is more or less able to carry this off this kind of act than a visual object with the same motivation. Although her main concern is with what visual art can tell us about how race signifies, Raengo does give credit to those objects that 'inhabit a place of avisuality and yet find a way to cut a figure, pierce the visual field'.⁴⁷² Textual description, as it operates in Oyeyemi's work, is such an object. In the following discussion I want to outline in greater detail how this author's prose succeeds in piercing the visual field. And I want to consider whether its avisuality, or to put it another way, its remediated version of visuality, is an advantage or a limitation in this respect.

Seeing, and then representing, race is barely dissociable from the act of categorization. Cornel West traces the emergence of modern racism back to classical antiquity's creation of a 'normative gaze'; that is, essentially 'an ideal from which to order and compare observations', and from which to establish a hierarchy of races.⁴⁷³ Racial categorization, West suggests, derives its logic from natural history. For both practices, '*observation* and *differentness*' are guiding principles:

⁴⁷² Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual*, p. 91.

⁴⁷³ Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), pp. 53-54.

The principal aim of natural history is to observe, compare, measure, and order animals and human bodies (or classes of animal and human bodies) *based on visible, especially physical, characteristics*. These characteristics permit one to discern identity and difference, equality and inequality, beauty and ugliness among animals and human bodies.⁴⁷⁴

So the perception and designation of race is essentially a descriptive act; the impulse is to ‘impose some degree of order or representational schema on a broad field of visible characteristics’.⁴⁷⁵ Vision enables categorization.

Oyeyemi’s prose details what this comparative approach, this weighing up of visual similarity versus visual difference, looks like. In *The Icarus Girl* Jess looks for difference, and she watches others do the same. Her white father looks out of place in Lagos airport:

Her father was standing near the carousel, his hands in his pockets, watching out for their luggage. Another thing she had not expected: she hadn’t expected him to seem so... well, out of place. His face was wet with perspiration and flushed pink, and even the way that he stood marked him out as different. The people milling around him all glanced pointedly as they passed; their glances were slightly longer than usual, but not outright stares – more the kind of look that Jess herself gave when passing a statue or a painting. The acknowledgement of an oddity.⁴⁷⁶

The passage is explicit as to Jess’s father’s difference. The phrases ‘out of place’ and ‘marked him out as different’ seem out of place themselves in this descriptive context. Their function is more interpretative, and their tone more essayistic, than might be expected of standard surface description. They stress that this passage delineates an evaluation of difference; it does not itself make a claim for the validity of this evaluation.

The crux of this evaluation is stress on vision’s role in ascribing otherness. The statue analogy sets this man up as an object to be viewed. Jess focuses on her father’s pink flush and awkward stance. Glances, stares, and looks are the dominant actions here. Jess analyses these looks at length. Oyeyemi’s specification of a very particular kind of looking, one comprised of shifty glances that seek out difference, recalls Matthew Pratt Guterl’s analysis of the role that ‘sightlines’ can play in

⁴⁷⁴ West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, p. 55.

⁴⁷⁵ West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, p. 55.

⁴⁷⁶ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, pp. 12-13.

constructing race. Race, for Pratt Guterl, crystallizes by means of repeated visual practices:

Race relies on the endless circulation and mediation of representation through these very comfortable, historically repeating perspectives. A cue of the eye, these sightlines ensure – or are designed to ensure – that the eye finds the center of attraction, that it sees race, and that we all see the same thing, generally, when we look. They guide our sight along familiar trajectories. They have established contours that close off other ways of seeing race, other possible ways of knowing and thinking about color, difference, and the body.⁴⁷⁷

The point is that the way in which Jess's father is viewed is to large extent pre-determined. Racial seeing takes place within a prescribed framework. Jess knows exactly how the people in Lagos airport see and assess her father. The detail that she sees the same look replicated from person to person stresses that this looking practice, and the reference points that it draws upon, is culturally embedded. In this way Oyeyemi's text describes our 'popular reliance on observable details and racial biometrics to classify, organize, and arrange different bodies, and the enrolment and imprinting of individual bodies with multiple markers that match a particular template, stereotype, or stock representation'.⁴⁷⁸

This passage, along with similar ones, shows one way in which Oyeyemi's prose succeeds in puncturing the visual field. Both on their own terms, and collectively, they expose the culturally prescribed strategies through which race and difference come into view. It would be more difficult to achieve the same effect with a literal image, as a viewer brings his or her own expectations, and previously seen images, to bear on the object. Lacking this component, the text is free to outline the looking practices that surround a given image, and that fix it as an object of difference. It reflects the visual field back at us.

Oyeyemi's texts continue to interact with the wider image environment in diverse ways. As seen above, often this interaction amounts to a reflection, and perhaps an implicit censure, of contemporary viewing practices. But Oyeyemi's narratives also go further than this, acceding to a more explicit critique of these practices. In *On the Sleeve of the Visual*, Raengo situates our tendency to read skin

⁴⁷⁷ Pratt Guterl, *Seeing Race*, p. 8.

⁴⁷⁸ Pratt Guterl, *Seeing Race*, p. 3.

and external features as markers of race within a wider context of slavery and commodity culture. This is a complicated theoretical move that relies upon a series of pivot points: whiteness and blackness as monetary assets; the exchangeability of black bodies; the political economy of the sign; the commodification of the visual sphere. But essentially Raengo's reading comes down to the concept of face value. The concept encompasses both the literal value that attaches to the black body and also our tendency to take black skin at face value; it expresses 'the idea that the visual is in continuity with the real as its outward fold'.⁴⁷⁹

Oyeyemi's work shows a similar interest in face value, also mobilizing it in a critique of a value-oriented contemporary viewing culture. Boy's boyfriend and her father look at her:

They both turned to me and went on a looking spree. I left them to it and wished I could sail over their heads and into the acid blue sky. They didn't look for long, it was more a practiced series of glances; they knew what they were looking for and seemed to find it. It was a wonder there was anything left by the time they were through looking.⁴⁸⁰

Again, this is an expression of the entrenchment of contemporary sightlines, directed here not at a critique of race, but at the 'practiced series of glances' by which male gaze views female object.

The passage speaks to Raengo's reading of face value. The expectation is that a visual surface contains value, informational or otherwise. And the idea that this value is for the taking, Raengo suggests, is keyed to the commodity. Here, looking is clearly about taking. The men go on a 'spree', and Boy is left depleted at the end of it. A subsequent simile secures this reading: 'he scraped away at me a little more', Boy says, 'with his dull nickel gaze'.⁴⁸¹ This association between a look and a five-cent coin clearly figures Boy's appearance as an object for purchase.

So this passage critiques the violent way in which a value-seeking look proceeds. But it also, when considered in the wider context of the novel within which it features, serves to undermine the very premise of such a look. That is, it effectively disputes the idea that the surface does indeed hold value. As I suggested earlier, adjectives that describe facial and bodily surfaces lose credibility as this

⁴⁷⁹ Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual*, p. 89.

⁴⁸⁰ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 120.

⁴⁸¹ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 121.

novel progresses. Oyeyemi's novel renders the adjectives black and white, along with their respective associated terms and figures of speech, meaningless both through overuse and misuse. Depending upon the juncture in the narrative, a single character might attract either marker.

This severance of a given descriptor from its typical meaning argues that visual surface be thought of not as strictly mimetic, but as malleable and shifting. It is text's way of complicating the terms of how identity and difference register in the visual sphere. Read like this, prose ably contributes to our understanding of how vision operates and what it produces. And it is effective in its critique of these practices and products. In refusing to give its own descriptive surface, and by association the visual image more widely, a stable value, it upsets prevailing patterns in the visual environment. By 'forcing a gap and inhabiting the space in between the surface and depth' in this way, Oyeyemi's prose disrupts the visual sphere just as successfully as those visual art objects that Raengo enlists as her examples.

3.3 The Visual Field's Possibilities

Alessandra Raengo's *On the Sleeve of the Visual*, so instrumental for my previous section, is as much a theory of the image as it is a theory of race. Raengo uses race as a base from which to examine how contemporary practices of viewing and visual representation operate more broadly. For Raengo, the racial image articulates the visual:

The fact that visual codes of race, for which 'black' and 'white' constitute the paradigm, continue to secure their referent – or more problematically, but also more frequently, that they continue to be read as portrayals – prompted the guiding question for the present study: What image ontology is needed for race to (still) be read off the surface of some body? Adopting the hermeneutic straining that Morrison describes in the epigraph, I am interested in works and situations in which we can see the fishbowl as such. Not so much when and how race is visible, but what it brings to visibility and what ontology of the visual is implied by the persistence of race.⁴⁸²

The allusion is to Toni Morrison's fishbowl analogy in *Playing in the Dark*. It communicates the shift from seeing a representation, to perceiving the mechanics that lie behind that representation: 'and suddenly I saw the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world'.⁴⁸³ The point is that in considering race, we also become aware of the wider image logic that organizes representations of race, and that affords race its visibility and saliency.

I think that a similar logic lies behind Oyeyemi's fiction's depictions of racial seeing. These moments are simply part of her work's wider investigation into the mechanics of the visual image. A central question drives and connects Oyeyemi's works of fiction: What can the visual do for us? In the following sections, I want to draw out some of the ways in which Oyeyemi's texts set about answering this question. Her work variously explores the possibilities and limitations of the visual field as an area for expression, for representation, and for the unfolding of identity. It also, as I will outline in the following concluding section, proposes the visual sphere as a support for intersubjectivity.

⁴⁸² Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual*, p. 3.

⁴⁸³ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1992), p. 17.

Oyeyemi's fiction's investment in figuring out sight and visual representation's potential manifests itself, in the first instance, in characters' rigorous and self-conscious looking practices. Throughout the author's work, Oyeyemi's prose takes an analytical approach towards what and how its characters see. This establishes a sense of interpretation at a local level, which feeds into Oyeyemi's work's wider narrative of visual investigation.

In its most straightforward form, this interpretative attitude is directed at vision's physiological aspects. Scenes continually shift into and out of focus, accompanied by a running commentary: 'my eyes came back into focus'; 'everything was dim and out of focus'; 'clear images came tumbling back into her vision'.⁴⁸⁴ Lapses in concentration and difficult viewing conditions means that some objects are only just seen, or that they are not seen at all: 'I glimpsed – or became aware of – someone walking on the other side of the saplings'; 'her eyes seemed to slide over them as if they were part of the pristine, stripy wallpaper'.⁴⁸⁵

The point of these instances is to stress the vagaries of perception and to direct the reader's attention to the periphery of the visual field. They show in detail what happens when vision or viewing conditions are compromised. An example from *The Icarus Girl* outlines both the optical quirk, and the resulting impression:

She couldn't see Tilly properly; her vision was blurring and it was as if she could only receive visual information about Tilly little bits at a time: the blue and turquoise of the friendship bracelet tied to her bony wrist; the green ribbon trailing from the end of each of Tilly's bushy black plaits; Tilly's eyes, widened now with concern.⁴⁸⁶

Text relays Jess's incremental reception of visual information. Semi-colons separate out disparate impressions, and in so doing give a sense of some of Tilly's features, but not the totality. In this way, the reader's impression follows that of Oyeyemi's perceptive protagonist. Oyeyemi's fiction has a clear interest in using text as an avenue for considering all aspects of sight, and not just the thematic issues that it raises. Here the concern is with the eye's flaws and suggestibility, along with its reliance on particular viewing conditions.

⁴⁸⁴ Oyeyemi, *Boy Snow Bird*, p. 20; Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 50, p. 50.

⁴⁸⁵ Oyeyemi, *Boy Snow Bird*, p. 59; *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 98.

⁴⁸⁶ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 187.

Further to taking an analytical approach towards sight's physics, Oyeyemi's narratives give significant space to spelling out the nuances of individual looks. In particular, the focus is with the charge or intent behind a given look. Simile is often the preferred tool for achieving this. *Boy, Snow, Bird*'s narrative relies on the device often:

So the women who pass Aunt Mia get a little extra pep to their step, but the men look at her the way I might look at a hot fudge sundae in the hours between lunch and dinner. You know, when you're not sure if it's a good idea to go ahead – you're interested beyond a shadow of a doubt, but you wonder if it might turn out to be a little too much for you.⁴⁸⁷

Here, as in the 'nickel gaze' example of my previous section, a woman figures as an object to be consumed. This simile is highly detailed, perhaps unnecessarily so to describe a single kind of glance. But, for the present discussion, this specificity is important. It tells us that Oyeyemi's prose is invested in helping the reader to grasp the exact tenor of, and meaning behind, a given look.

Instances of close attention to the act of looking, as well as to the target object, continue throughout the author's work. And they generally follow a similar pattern. In *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Mia tells Boy: 'The way you're looking at me, people have looked at me that way before'.⁴⁸⁸ First, Mia gauges the intent of Boy's look. And then she contextualizes it, positioning it within a catalogue of previous looks. Such examples tell of the variations in how a given look might play out, as they attend both to looking's physiological, and its psychological, components. I think that the frequency and detail of these attentive passages demand of the reader a substantial degree of interpretative engagement with the processes and objects of vision. As in Smith's or Cole's work, Oyeyemi's visually attuned characters and narrative voice similarly sensitise the reader or critic to the mixed function and potential of the visual field.

So Oyeyemi's narratives show a sophisticated appreciation for the patterns and variations that attach to sight and images. But appreciation in this instance is not, I

⁴⁸⁷ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 148.

⁴⁸⁸ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 288.

want to make clear, the same as understanding. Visuality, as it registers through Oyeyemi's prose, is not something that can be set out in straightforward terms. It is, rather, something that needs to be worked upon and figured out. As I outlined earlier, Smith and Cole use literary narratives as a support for sketching out the limitations of visual representation. Depictions of gender and race emerged as key areas of concern in this respect. Proceeding from this, both authors then use their texts as a space within which to consider how one might broach such limitations. They propose key counter-strategies, like adopting a pose or withdrawing from the visual sphere altogether.

Oyeyemi's fiction also shows an interest in these two strategies. This commonality between my three chosen authors stems, in part, from some features intrinsic to textual representation. Unlike its visual equivalent, textual images do not carry the expectation that they will express a one-to-one correspondence with their referent. Images built from words are more free-floating in this respect. As I have set out elsewhere, prose description can attach a given adjective to an object and then, at a later point, undo any such association. It seems that prose description is less essentializing and more able to sustain invisibility than actual images.

Oyeyemi's novels make the most of prose's potential in this respect. As my previous section set out, the author's fluid use of adjectives of colour drives a wedge between racialized surface and depth, arguing against there being any equivalence between the two. We find this descriptive practice replicated at the level of narrative action across the author's work. As in Smith's or Cole's work, Oyeyemi's characters experiment often with invisibility and unknowability. These strategies, to which prose description is well suited, work to subvert the visual sphere's expectations and limitations.

Oyeyemi populates her fiction with characters that cannot be pinned to established categories. In *The Icarus Girl*, Dulcie complains to Jess: 'You're all different again [...] I wish you'd just decide how you were going to be and sort of... well, *be it*'.⁴⁸⁹ Jess's confusing racial background registers as a problem of representation. 'Maybe Jessamy has all these "attacks" because she can't make up her mind whether she's black or white', suggests a friend.⁴⁹⁰

⁴⁸⁹ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 202.

⁴⁹⁰ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 86.

A passage in *Boy, Snow, Bird* similarly plays with expectations surrounding identity's superficial availability. Charlie's failure to reconcile his perceived image of Boy with present experience registers, again, as a problem of representation:

I looked into his eyes. He couldn't return the gaze steadily, kept focusing on my left eye, then on my right. I could guess what he was thinking: that there were two of me, that was the explanation. That was why I was acting like this. I had applied this rationale to the rat catcher the first time he'd punched me. First you try to find a reason, try to understand what you've done wrong so you can be sure not to do it anymore. After that you look for signs of a Jekyll and Hyde situation, the good and the bad in a person sifted into separate compartments by some weird accident. Then, gradually, you realize that there isn't a reason, and it isn't two people you're dealing with, just one. The same one every time. Keep switching eyes all you want, Charlie. You're going to hate the conclusion your reach.⁴⁹¹

The point is that Charlie's inability to understand Boy figures as an inability to see her properly. His gaze scans Boy's face for clues, hoping to find an explanation for her conflicted personality written there. The set-up of this scene, which describes Boy looking at Charlie looking at her, heightens its visual aspect. Given this emphasis, we take the phrase 'look for signs' literally; Boy has read her father's face with the same intent that Charlie now reads hers. Vision as it plays out here fails on two counts. Firstly, it fails to give Charlie the information that he wants. But most importantly it also serves to reassert, rather than broach, the divide between these two lookers. Charlie's gaze looks for conformity, it wants to categorize. And in response to this, Boy remains closed off. Exchanges like these register as part of Oyeyemi's work's wider interest in figuring out how the visual works and what it can, or cannot, achieve.

Moments that assess the value of manipulating the visual field constitute a further strand to this investigation. Like Smith's work, Oyeyemi's fiction proposes performance as a possible strategy for countering the perceived failings of visual representation and interaction. These fictional delineations of performance serve a dual purpose. In the first instance, they arise because the visual presents as somehow inadequate. They are a response to, and so draw attention to, the visual image's susceptibility to essentialism and categorization, for instance. But they also serve a

⁴⁹¹ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 108.

recuperative role, as they stress that the visual sphere can sustain intervention and self-determination.

Expressions of theatricality run throughout Oyeyemi's work. And, especially when they target race, these moments tend to serve the former purpose. Upon an initial reading, at least, they highlight the visual's deficiencies more than they unfold its potential. In this study's introduction I mentioned the vocabulary of deception that so often attaches to statements of race in Oyeyemi's work:

Snow's beauty is all the more precious to Olivia and Agnes because it's a trick. When whites look at her, they don't get whatever fleeting, ugly impressions so many of us get when we see a colored girl – we don't see a colored girl standing there. The joke's on us.⁴⁹²

The terminology that Oyeyemi uses here recalls that of contemporary critical studies of race. It reminds us, for instance, of Mitchell's description of race as 'a costume, a mask, or a masquerade that can be put on, played upon, and disavowed'.⁴⁹³ Again, here the point is that racial surface is artificial and so liable to manipulation; as it does elsewhere through its adjectival choices, in this passage Oyeyemi's prose tackles the concept of 'face value'.

Continuing in this vein, the author calls on the vocabulary of artistic expression to stress the simulated nature of racial surface. She outlines the strategies behind racial passing: 'The Whitmans have married to refine a look, they keep a close eye on skin tone and hair texture. They draw strict distinctions between degrees of color – quadroon, octoroon – darkest to lightest'.⁴⁹⁴ The terms 'refine', 'tone', and 'texture' position the Whitmans' look as a product of certain creative choices. 'Quadroon' and 'octoroon' almost read off as a colour palette. These semantic choices highlight the artificiality of racial display. More importantly, however, they also stress that any such display predominantly proceeds visually.

These moments, scattered throughout the author's work, amount to fairly standard expressions of visual surface's untrustworthiness. In *The Icarus Girl*, Jess gives her mother a 'half-hearted, placebo smile'.⁴⁹⁵ 'Half-hearted' shows the disjoint between outward expression and inner sentiment. 'Placebo' asserts that this smile is

⁴⁹² Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 139.

⁴⁹³ Mitchell, *Seeing Through Race*, p. xiii; see also, Pratt Guterl, *Seeing Race*, p. 12.

⁴⁹⁴ *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 216.

⁴⁹⁵ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 13.

false and placatory. A similar pretence arises later in the novel: ‘once her mother could no longer see her face, Jess’s expression of remorse shifted into an empty reflex expression, the corners of her mouth tugging up into a smile’.⁴⁹⁶ Here, ‘empty’ and ‘reflex’ carry the same force as the earlier ‘half-hearted’ and ‘placebo’. The intent is to point up the simulated nature of visual surface, and to stress the easy manipulation of this outward form. This is not, however, the end point of Oyeyemi’s survey of visibility. Instead her work offers passages that recast visual surface’s slipperiness in a different light. A visual sphere that promises theatre and manipulation also offers, Oyeyemi’s fiction tells us, opportunity. The most striking example of this is, of course, the act of passing. Across Smith’s novels, women pass as men. And in Oyeyemi’s work, black passes for white. On a wider level, these practices generally serve to reinscribe, rather than ease, rigid identity categorizations. But nevertheless, for the individual agents involved, passing does permit a certain degree of freedom within these prescribed frameworks.

Leaving this particular difficulty aside, passages in Oyeyemi’s work articulate the possibilities for self-expression that a volatile visual environment provides. An extended set piece in *Boy, Snow, Bird* plays with the idea of face value. More specifically, it celebrates the result of prising face from value. Boy finds a newspaper advertisement: ‘A company that specialized in cocktail mixers had put a call out for blondes (*lots of blondes, most shapes, shades, and sizes! Tell your friends!*) to act as hostesses for their Valentine’s Day soiree’.⁴⁹⁷ As the qualifier ‘most’ indicates, the appearance of these hostesses is key: ‘this party is for the big-shot investors, and the bosses want to make sure that these investors like what they see’.⁴⁹⁸

Oyeyemi’s narrative goes on to outline this event at great length. Throughout, the focus is on the look of these women. They form part of an exclusive group, and their value lies in their appearance: ‘I was one of about a hundred blondes who showed up at the dock that afternoon’; ‘our violent chiffon dresses’; ‘we’d already stood silhouetted by the by the sunset, letting the lake breeze blow our hair into a golden haze’; ‘every one of us hired blondes temporarily became a coat-check

⁴⁹⁶ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 68.

⁴⁹⁷ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 27.

⁴⁹⁸ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 27.

girl'.⁴⁹⁹ These extracts communicate the collective visual impact of these women and highlight their shared attribute – blondness – over any individuality. Oyeyemi's repeated use of the plural first person pronoun secures this reading.

The narrative section knowingly plays up the absurdity of the event that it describes. The picture that it paints for the reader is lurid and hyperbolic: one hundred blondes in violet dresses on a boat. Looks are a commodity: 'Herb Hill Beverages – fun, accessible, yet exclusive, just like us lovely ladies'.⁵⁰⁰ Again, the passage brings to mind Raengo's interest in appearance as a commodity form. The joke here is that, like blackness or paper money, blondness only pretends to value.⁵⁰¹

The conclusion to this narrative section offers the punch line: 'at seven a.m., as the three of us walked back along the dock in Worcester, the sun shone onto us through wooden slats and Mia pulled off her wig, ran her fingers through her bouncy black hair and laughed at my expression'.⁵⁰² This one movement undermines the party's entire premise: its attendance by 'accessible, yet exclusive' blondes. The disjoint between Mia's blonde wig and her actual 'bouncy black hair' presses the point.

The idea that value can be read off a visual surface is, for Raengo, a condition of contemporary representation. She takes the banknote or coin as paradigmatic of face's conflation with value:

money becomes so naturalized that, in money, value seems indeed to be branded on the forehead. In money, value is understood and regarded *as face value*, as if a bill's or a coin's value naturally sprung from its (surface) denomination. This hermeneutics of the surface is both a signature trait of modern-day racial slavery and of our hyper-speculative contemporary moment.

The one problem with Raengo's argument is, I think, the gullibility that she attributes to the contemporary viewer. Our visual environment is extensive and highly developed. And we have developed suitably sophisticated ways of responding to it. It seems to me that our trust in face value is not an unthinking belief; it is, rather, a willing subscription to the concept. The problem is less that we subscribe in

⁴⁹⁹ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 28, p. 28, p. 29, p. 34.

⁵⁰⁰ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 28.

⁵⁰¹ See in particular 'Chapter Three: The Money of the Real' in *On the Sleeve of the Visual* by Raengo, pp. 87-198.

⁵⁰² Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, p. 38.

the first place, more that we forget that we have done so, or that we apply the concept to an inappropriate sphere. Money, for instance, relies on face value for its workability. Bringing a hermeneutics of surface to bear on human bodies, on the other hand, is a misapplication.

While the contemporary viewer is, I think, aware of this fact, he or she nevertheless needs reminders of it. Raengo finds one such reminder in ‘the concept, the practice, and the aesthetics of blackface’. For her, the practice allows for a consideration of ‘the hermeneutics of face value at a site where it is both reified and put *en-abyme*; that is, turned into a tangible sensorial object but also a regime of representation that reflexively comments on itself’. We can categorize Oyeyemi’s inset blondes anecdote as one such self-conscious site. It puts *en-abyme* the theory work of this novel, and it lays bare visual surface’s claim to mimesis more widely.

But, as I stressed above, this is not all that Oyeyemi’s fiction wants to achieve. Further to driving a wedge between face and value, the author’s work also tries to reclaim this superficial visual territory as a space of possibility. The above passage from *Boy, Snow, Bird* is a pleasurable, as well as an illustrative, site. Subverting the expectations that attach to a given image is entertaining, both for the fictional agents and for the reader. The wider point is that within a visual culture that privileges surface, this surface can be played up and put to use in a variety of ways.

In the following, and concluding, section to my reading of Oyeyemi’s work I want to pursue this line of enquiry further. My specific question is how does the visual field show up positively in the fiction of this particular author? My broader concern is the same as that which has motivated this study throughout: how can contemporary fiction engage with, archive, and explain the workings of its wider cultural, and specifically visual, environment?

3.4 Reading Faces

Throughout this study I have drawn out how recent novels critique, as well as mirror, their wider visual context. In spite of this critique, however, I do not think that we should simply locate these novels as participants in a wider tradition of visual scepticism. Martin Jay has outlined how vision, long the subject of suspicion, fully came under attack in twentieth-century thinking. Jay outlines how, following on from a wider counter-enlightenment movement, various forces in the twentieth century combine to produce a crisis in ocularcentrism. Such forces include the rapid proliferation of visual technologies and images in this period, along with the growth of certain anti-visual theoretical discourses, such as Marxism, existential philosophy, and psychoanalysis.⁵⁰³ For instance, as Mary Ann Doane points out, although the latter relies heavily on ‘scenarios of vision’ such as the mirror phase or the primal scene, psychoanalysis has nevertheless ‘consistently adopted a stance of suspicion in relation to the realm of the visible, intimately bound up as it would seem to be to the register of consciousness’.⁵⁰⁴

While the work of my three considered authors does register the influence of such suspicion, we should not group them with those texts that aim at an indiscriminate denigration of vision and visual representation. As I hope to have shown, Smith’s and Cole’s writings consider both sides of the argument. They express the visual field’s limitations, especially in relation to representing certain identities, but they also sketch out its possibility. And indeed the texts that I consider, both on account of their discrete surface details and their more wholesale remediations of visual representational forms, can themselves be considered very visual things. I uncover a similar nuance in Oyeyemi’s work. Her fiction reflects and unfolds the visual field in all its variety and, as with Smith and Cole, reclaiming the visual as a space of possibility is a key strand to this enterprise.

Once more, my focus in this section is on how the contemporary novel contributes to our understanding of how vision can produce an ethical access onto the world. I think that, itself at one remove from literal visuality, prose is well

⁵⁰³ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁵⁰⁴ Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 44.

positioned to articulate responsible viewing practices. In the case of Oyeyemi's fiction this articulation mostly comes down a consideration of sight's contribution to intersubjectivity. In this capacity her work recalls many aspects of the similar discussion that plays out in Smith's work. For instance, the work of both authors stresses the importance of looking with proper attention. And they outline how this attentive looking plays out on an interpersonal level. This commonality between Smith's and Oyeyemi's fiction is particularly striking. But Cole's work also has a place in this. The prose of all three writers, on account of its intricate descriptive surfaces, asks the reader to heed detail closely. And in this way, it demands at the level of reader response that which it advocates at a thematic level.

Across Oyeyemi's novels, we uncover sensitivity towards the efficacy of given looks. Typically in this author's work, an adverb accompanies optical verbs. And often the point of the chosen adverb is to stress dedicated or appropriate attention. These adverbs and other similar qualifiers constitute a particularly notable trope in *The Icarus Girl*: 'the only thing that she *really* looked at'; 'she had sat there all alone, knees pulled up to her chin, seeing, *properly* seeing'; Jess 'eyed her mother *attentively*'; she 'continued to contemplate her *seriously*'; 'if Jess hadn't kept her eyes *fixed* on her she would certainly have missed it'; 'the two of them had begun to speak as they did when they couldn't see each other *properly*'; 'she couldn't see Tilly *properly*'; 'she had *not quite-seen*'.⁵⁰⁵ The point of such distinction between different kinds of seeing is to suggest that looking itself can be a neutral practice; it is the act's quality and direction that, Oyeyemi's fiction tells us, carries the ethical weight.

Faces feature as a key site for the testing out of this premise. By sketching out different scenarios of face-to-face interaction, Oyeyemi's fiction tries to reach an understanding of how good looking might proceed and what it might produce. In her study of the miniature, Susan Stewart explains why faces can be considered points of access:

If the surface is the location of the body's meaning, it is because that surface is invisible to the body itself. And if the face reveals a depth and profundity which the body itself is not capable of, it is because the eyes and to some degree the mouth are openings onto fathomlessness. Behind the appearance

⁵⁰⁵ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 30, p. 31, p. 35, p. 40, p. 45, p. 49, p. 187, p. 289 (my italics throughout).

of eyes and mouth lies the interior stripped of appearances. Hence we “read” the expression of the face with trepidation, for this reading is never apparent from the surface alone; it is continually confronted by the correction of the other. The face is a type of “deep” text, a text whose meaning is complicated by change and by a constant series of alterations between a reader and an author who is strangely disembodied.⁵⁰⁶

Stewart’s reading of surface as a doorway onto depth keys well to my own study’s understanding of the relation between the two. Highly visual textual surfaces are, for the reading critic, entrance points to deeper meaning. But most important for my present analysis is the link that Stewart establishes between face and subjectivity. The face remains unseen by its owner, and at the same time it is readily available to the other. The face discloses some kind of interior meaning, with this meaning itself being brought forth, and indeed altered, by an onlooker’s gaze. In this way, it is both the locus of subjectivity and a platform for intersubjectivity.

In *The Icarus Girl*, characters persistently scrutinize faces for information. Following Stewart’s positioning of the face as a text, a lexicon of reading and decipherment stresses the interpretative nature of this act: ‘her mother waited, and Jessamy’s brown wrinkled as she scanned her face, perplexed’; ‘Tilly shot her an unreadable glance’; ‘TillyTilly had her tongue stuck out a little too as her eyes scanned Jess’s face’.⁵⁰⁷ This terminology of legibility promotes the face as an object capable of offering up understanding, if parsed properly.

Faces figure in this capacity throughout this novel. Jess’s sensitivity towards her mother’s face amounts to a minor narrative trope. She is continually alert to any change in facial expression that might denote a correlative change in mood: ‘she didn’t laugh because her mum looked sort of cross’; ‘she saw her mum’s shoulder’s relax’.⁵⁰⁸ Crucially, both examples pivot on an optical verb. We find this visual mode of decipherment writ large across the author’s work. A consideration of the variations in Jess’s mother’s smile even dominates entire narrative sections. Jess returns to her mother’s smile again and again, charting its change over time: ‘Jess knew that the smile wasn’t a particularly happy one, and that her mother hadn’t

⁵⁰⁶ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 127.

⁵⁰⁷ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 5, p. 64, p. 136.

⁵⁰⁸ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 5.

smiled like that in England'; 'Jessamy saw a real smile spread across her mother's face, as if she had just remembered sunshine'.⁵⁰⁹

As with Cole's camera-like narrators or Smith's artists, Oyeyemi's protagonist in this novel demonstrates great visual sensitivity. And, because free indirect discourse is the dominant narrative mode of *The Icarus Girl*, the texture of Oyeyemi's prose necessarily reflects this sensitivity:

Her mum smiled at her. There was something in the smile that Jess could only vaguely describe as *careful*.

It was the same smile that she had worn when they had been going through customs. The official behind the desk had a neat moustache and goatee beard, and his expression had been polite; in fact, overpolite. So solicitous that his face was immobile, and Jess, looking at him from a short distance beneath the counter, thought that he was somehow making fun of her mother. The man had flicked his gaze over her with the same small smile on his face.⁵¹⁰

Again, this three-way interaction is based predominantly on how each character looks at, and is apparently perceived by, others. Oyeyemi particularizes these given looks. Qualifiers feature heavily: something, vaguely, over, so, somehow. It seems that smiles, in this novel, are not to be taken as basic indicators of happiness. These surface signs, rather, merit considered attention.

Before reflecting on what Oyeyemi's novel tells us about the relation between such visually rooted interactions and intersubjectivity, I first want to set out in detail a critical framework for such a reading. Specifically, I turn to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's consideration of the congruities between emotion and performance. Her 2003 essay collection, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, while drawing to some extent on previous writings, 'also represents a distinct project' on its own terms.⁵¹¹ The collection as a whole traces the theoretical afterlife of J. L. Austin's seminal concept of performativity, and it torques this concept to Silvan Tomkins's affect theory. In the volume's first essay, this response to Austin and Tomkins targets Henry James's fiction. For Sedgwick, James's novels provide the

⁵⁰⁹ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 13.

⁵¹⁰ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 13.

⁵¹¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 1.

point of access for a consideration of shame, and for a discussion of the slippages and discrepancies between performativity and theatricality. Sedgwick's readings will prove, I think, helpful for thinking about how visual interaction operates in Oyeyemi's work.

Reading shame in psychoanalytic terms, Sedgwick outlines the visual markers of this feeling and describes its primal scene:

Recent work by theorists and psychologists of shame locates the proto-form (eyes down, head averted) of this powerful affect – which appears in infants very early, between the third and seventh month of life, just after the infant has become able to distinguish and recognize the face of its caregiver – at a particular moment in a particular repeated narrative. That is the moment when the circuit of mirroring expressions between the child's face and the caregiver's recognized face (a circuit that, if it can be called a form of primary narcissism, suggests that narcissism from the very first throws itself sociably, dangerously into the gravitational field of the other) is broken: the moment when the adult face fails or refuses to play its part in the continuation of a mutual gaze; when, for one of many reasons, it fails to be recognizable to, or recognizing of, the infant who has been, so to speak, "giving face" based on a faith in the continuity of this circuit.⁵¹²

So this emotion's marker is a visual, and specifically facial, one: the eyes look down, the head turns away. And the very first assumption of this position is a formative moment for psychological development. It is a moment of differentiation, in which the infant no longer simply emulates the expression of the other. 'Shame floods into being as a moment', Sedgwick writes, 'a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication'. But this disruption itself also constitutes identity: 'in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity'.⁵¹³

Although the identificatory relation between mother and child appears to be broken in this instance, intersubjectivity nevertheless emerges out of this rupture. 'Blazons of shame', such as the downcast face or the blush, 'are semaphores of trouble and at the same time of a desire to reconstitute the interpersonal bridge'.⁵¹⁴ The point is that while facial cues of emotion serve to delimit and distinguish individuals, these cues are nevertheless outwardly motivated. Sedgwick takes shame as her main example because this particular feeling is 'both peculiarly contagious

⁵¹² Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 36.

⁵¹³ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 36.

⁵¹⁴ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 36.

and particularly individuating'; it 'encompasses both painful individuation' and uncontrollable relationality'.⁵¹⁵

So Sedgwick's scenario tells of the simultaneous rupture and reclamation of the interpersonal relationship. As I see it, it is the stress on looking and on visual cues that gives Sedgwick's reading its applicability to my own study. The expression of an emotion, such as shame, essentially triggers a visual dialogue. Easily recognisable and socially cemented visual tropes, such as a fallen head or diverted eyes, are the outward face of inner emotion. This, for Sedgwick, is what gives the expression of emotion a theatrical quality. The point is that feeling's external cues assume an audience. And this audience, in recognising these cues, is brought into an empathetic relation with the other.

Read with Sedgwick in mind, facial expressions in *The Icarus Girl* show up as both highly visual and theatrical. In the first instance, Oyeyemi's descriptions show how emotions rely on well-known visual forms for their effect. We read of an 'expression of remorse' or a 'tight expression of anger'.⁵¹⁶ Cheeks that are 'puffed' out denote 'mild exasperation'.⁵¹⁷ In all of these examples, Oyeyemi's phraseology makes clear that each facial position has an emotional correlate. And it is also clear that these positions assume an audience. 'Jess held still', the narrative tells us, and 'tried to assume an expression that would satisfy whatever her mother was looking for'.⁵¹⁸ Oyeyemi's text shows exactly how these external cues enact their effect on the given audience. Jess, for instance, deduces much from TillyTilly's changing face: 'TillyTilly looked suitably impressed by the gravity of all this, her eyebrows raised in what Jess fancied to be a mix of disapproval at Colleen's behaviour and amazement that she could dislike Jess'.⁵¹⁹ Again, there is a clear correlate between action and emotion; raised eyebrows translate into a specific mix of disapproval and wonder. And by showing TillyTilly's face to the reader from Jess's perspective, Oyeyemi's fiction reiterates how facial aspect functions for the benefit of a viewing other.

Sedgwick's reading is helpful as it allows me to reposition performance as a productive mode of being in the visual field, specifically in an intersubjective

⁵¹⁵ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 36, p. 37.

⁵¹⁶ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 68.

⁵¹⁷ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 227.

⁵¹⁸ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 6.

⁵¹⁹ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 94.

capacity. In my discussion of the pose in Smith's work, one's ability for self-expression in this way showed up as circumscribed by various visual conventions and stereotypes. A similar story emerges from looking at the phenomenon of passing as delineated through Oyeyemi's work; choosing which race to present as involves conforming to a prescribed racial framework. Further, manipulating one's outward image in such a way, as Oyeyemi's blondes on a boat and other anecdotes tell us, establishes appearance as a place of miscommunication. Performance, on these counts, casts visual surface as a barrier to satisfactory expression, of the self or otherwise.

But running alongside this story in Oyeyemi's work, we find a counter-argument. In Smith's novels, aesthetic and everyday visual experiences ultimately emerge as transformative, both on an individual and on an interpersonal level. In Cole's fiction, a thematic thread of visual denigration fails to detract from a densely visual prose style; Cole's narratives proceed visually, and they read as a collage of images. Oyeyemi's work intersects with that of these two writers in both respects. Before bringing my study of her fiction to a close, I want to consider one final example in detail. It works well both as an exposition of key facets to Oyeyemi's own survey of visibility, and as a point of comparison with Smith's and Cole's respective approaches.

My chosen scene comes from *The Icarus Girl*. Here, Jess meets her grandfather for the first time. The episode amounts to an extended visual interaction, by which Jess and her grandfather return to look at each other again and again over the course of several pages. The meeting is an opportunity for Jess to revise 'the picture' of her grandfather 'that her mother had painted for her over the years'. Substantial descriptive detail communicates this new picture to the reader. A greeting is opportunity to tell of his 'big and square, spade-like' hands, their 'deeply etched and callused palms'.⁵²⁰ The description focuses in on his face:

So her grandfather did have a face. It was a broad, lined face; the smile and frown lines ran deep into his skin, his eyes made smaller by the loosened flesh around them. He had the same wide, strong jaw line with the

⁵²⁰ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 19.

determined set as her mother, and the same prominent cheekbones, although Jess could see that his were made angular more through the emaciation of age than anything else.⁵²¹

The passage conveys as much visual information as is possible in the space available. Each feature attracts at least two adjectives. His face is ‘broad, lined’. The jaw is ‘wide, strong’. And his cheekbones are ‘prominent’ and ‘angular’. Oyeyemi’s description attends to texture: expression lines run deep, and bags sag under his eyes.

As with so many of the passages in Smith’s fiction, we can figure this one above as a literary response to, or even endorsement of, aspects of Silverman’s ethics of the image. In setting out the criteria for an ethical looking practice, Silverman demands several things of the viewer. Generous attentiveness to the given object or individual must, of course, be involved. But this attention should not assume a stable outcome; crucially, the recasting of previously conceived images, whether mental or otherwise, forecloses complacency. Undertaken in this way, looking does not overwhelm its object, but rather it enters into an understanding with it through reassessment and modification.

Various features of the considered passage from *The Icarus Girl* conspire to make us read it in Silverman’s terms. Most strikingly, Oyeyemi’s description in these pages brings to mind aspects of film composition. Specifically, I think that the way in which Oyeyemi’s descriptions close in on their subjects emulates the logic of the filmic close-up. In cinema, this shot tightly frames its subject, focusing in on its detail. And it also abstracts it, as Doane explains, from the surrounding narrative: ‘The close-up in general is disengaged from the mise-en-scène, freighted with an inherent separability or isolation, a “for-itself” that inevitably escapes, to some degree, the tactics of continuity editing that strive to make it “whole” again’.⁵²²

Oyeyemi’s descriptions of Jess and Jess’s grandfather work similarly. Like Smith’s inset portraits or Cole’s photographic vignettes, these descriptive moments stand slightly apart from the surrounding story. The narrative itself readily articulates this sense of detachment:

⁵²¹ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 20.

⁵²² Mary Ann Doane, ‘The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema’, *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 14.3 (2003), 89-111 (p. 91).

As Jess sat in the parlour, keeping very still so that she wouldn't take up much space on the brown and white sofa, she allowed herself to stare openly and seriously at her grandfather, and he did the same. She felt as if she were a little piece of him that had crumbled off, which he was examining for flaws and broken bits before deciding whether it was worth taking it to be reattached. It was impossible to tell what he thought of her.⁵²³

Closely observed in this way, Jess thinks of herself as a fragment. The point is that an object needs cutting out and isolating before it can be seen properly. We find this excising action replicated in Oyeyemi's own technique. While her lengthy descriptions serve as characterizations, there is little advancement of plot across these pages. The images stand alone, and the narrative presents more as a collage than as a linear progression. Such an organization serves a very specific purpose. Writing on its cinematic deployment, Doane describes the deictic function that is typically attributed to the close-up. She writes of how this compositional unit 'embodies the pure fact of representation, of manifestation, of showing – a "here it is"'.⁵²⁴ So the filmic close-up points at, or calls attention to, itself. And the same can be said of literary renderings of the technique. Setting descriptive images apart from the main narrative directs the attention of the fictional viewer, and the reader, towards the isolated object.

Aside from this being an effective mode of characterization and of engaging the reader, Oyeyemi's prose is invested more widely in setting out the intersubjective potential of attentive looking and describing. In her survey of the pivotal role that the close-up plays in film theory, Doane sets out some of the contradictory readings that this filmic unit attracts. In the first instance, we might read it as 'the privileged vehicle of affect'.⁵²⁵ Construed as such, the close-up is crucial to establishing an empathetic relationship between the film's viewer and the onscreen character. And Doane explains how for Hugo Münsterberg, writing in 1916, the cinematic close-up is in fact emblematic of the faculty of attention: '*The close-up has objectified in our world of perception our mental act of attention*'.⁵²⁶ More often than not, however, theorists have positioned the close-up more negatively. A close focus on the surface, for instance, risks casting that surface as a fetish or type:

⁵²³ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 21.

⁵²⁴ Doane, 'The Close-Up', p. 91.

⁵²⁵ Doane, 'The Close-Up', p. 90.

⁵²⁶ Hugo Münsterberg, *The Film: A Psychological Study* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2004), p. 38.

The face is that bodily part not accessible to the subject's own gaze (or accessible only as a virtual image in a mirror), and simultaneously it is the site that is *seen* and read by the other – hence its over-representation as *the* instance of subjectivity. The scale of the close-up transforms the face into an instance of the gigantic, the monstrous: it overwhelms. The face, usually the mark of individuality, becomes tantamount to a theorem in its generalizability.⁵²⁷

It seems that rather than re-establishing the face as the site of subjectivity, the close-up depersonalizes a given face.

Gilles Deleuze supports this idea that the close-up deprives the face of its typical function:

Ordinarily, three roles of the face are recognisable: it is individuating (it distinguishes or characterises each person); it is socialising (it manifests a social role); it is relational or communicating (it ensures not only communication between two people, but also, in a single person, the internal agreement between his character and his role). Now the face, which effectively presents these aspects in cinema as elsewhere, loses all three in the case of close-up.⁵²⁸

So for Deleuze, a tightly framed image of the face is suited neither to an expression of subjectivity, nor to an intersubjective exchange.

Doane draws on both sides of the debate in order to make her wider point, which is that the close-up helps us to get to grips with our 'contemporary schizophrenia of scale'.⁵²⁹ 'As both microcosm and macrocosm, the miniature and the gigantic', the close-up's political value lies in how it 'acts as a nodal point linking the ideologies of intimacy and interiority to public space and the authority of the monumental'.⁵³⁰ My own reading of close-ups in *The Icarus Girl* is aligned more with the former critical tradition, than the latter. My interest is in the close-up's ability to express intimacy and to provoke attention. As I see it, Oyeyemi's use of the technique in literary description does not invest in surface at the expense of

⁵²⁷ Doane, 'The Close-Up', p. 94.

⁵²⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 110.

⁵²⁹ Doane, 'The Close-Up', p. 110.

⁵³⁰ Doane, 'The Close-Up', p. 109.

individuality. It is interested, rather, in provoking close looking, both at the level of character interaction and in terms of reader response.

Across the considered pages, Oyeyemi's prose sets out close looking's bearing on intersubjectivity:

She looked into her grandfather's face again as they both waited for the hissing sound of gas escaping the bottle, and they both flinched a little from the sheer nakedness of contact between eye and eye. It wasn't an unpleasant flinching, but the surprised movement of two who are accustomed to looking closely at other people, but unaccustomed to being seen.⁵³¹

This passage points up one key difference between the close-up as deployed in film, and the close-up as traceable through this literary text. In the former, unless a given close-up operates as part of a shot-reverse-shot structure, then any sense of the given detail's position within a matrix of seeing and seen objects is momentarily lost. But Oyeyemi's free indirect discourse means that the reader is always aware of who is doing the looking; Jess, in this instance. And, importantly, we recognise that a given looker is also an object to be viewed.

The role that this extract plays in its wider narrative is keyed to the revisionary, measured approach that Silverman sees as requisite for generous perception. This is one of many instances in which Jess returns to look at her grandfather across these pages. The passage also expresses the importance of reciprocity in any ethical visual exchange. In my reading of Smith's fiction, I drew on Bal's distinction between oppressive looking, and mutuality or the 'face-to-face'.⁵³² For Bal, recognition of the 'fact that seeing comes with being seen' is the first necessary step towards putting pressure on potentially harmful looking practices – 'voyeurism, pornography, an othering that eroticizes people, attraction and repulsion, stereotyping and self-styling'.⁵³³ Smith, by staging a number of productive visual conversations between her characters, uses fiction as a space to illustrate mutuality's benefit in these respects. And moments across Oyeyemi's work similarly bear out Bal's premise.

The pages that I am considering at the moment, for instance, act as a guide in reciprocal vision. Visual interaction must proceed, Oyeyemi's narrative tells us, by

⁵³¹ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 22.

⁵³² Bal, 'The Commitment to Look', p. 150.

⁵³³ Bal, 'The Commitment to Look', p. 150.

means of proper attention. A series of close-up descriptions drive this point home, as the reader is forced into a kind of close looking that mirrors that of the depicted characters. Attentive and retroactive looking has transformation as its end point:

Finally, he smiled, and although his smile was bumpy because some of his teeth were jagged and broken, it was a warming, infectious smile that was reflected in his eyes. It made her smile widely in return. She felt as if the room had been lit up. He held out his arms, and she went across the room to him, almost running.⁵³⁴

Here physical contact and, more importantly, some kind of understanding, closely follows on from visual contact. Oyeyemi's phrasing points up this exchange's mutual aspect; Jess smiles 'in return'. The analogy of illumination neatly recalls the terms with which Silverman colours her own theory of ethical visual interaction. Experiencing ourselves as seen by another, Silverman writes, brings us into being – it lights us up.⁵³⁵ Literary narrative and descriptive techniques, on these counts, sets out in detail how a subject might come into satisfactory contact with the world, and another, through vision.

In my closing comments, I want to draw together a couple of thematic and theoretical threads that have surfaced across this survey of Oyeyemi's work, and across this dissertation as a whole. The very first thing that Oyeyemi's work tells us about our contemporary visual field is its continued capacity to sustain unproductive viewing practices. Under the wider umbrella of fictional engagements with visuality, certain issues arise with particular urgency. For Cole and Oyeyemi race necessarily attracts critique, rooted as it is in a history of certain viewing conventions and images. This concern with stereotyping, categorizing, and objectifying the visible body intersects to a significant degree with Smith's investigation into the role that vision plays in reading gender, and identity more widely.

In light of the visual sphere's perceived limitations, the novels of all three authors put forward some counter-strategies. For Oyeyemi's fiction, this primarily comes down to an interest in what happens when individuals knowingly perform under and manipulate a limiting image environment. But any positive view of visual

⁵³⁴ Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, p. 21.

⁵³⁵ Silverman, *World Spectators*, p. 19.

representation and interaction that arises from these texts does not function simply in a reactive capacity. Rather, Oyeyemi's fiction actively expresses visuality's potential. In the first instance, we can read this endorsement off the surface of her texts – in basic terms, her writing is very visual. A more sustained articulation of looking's productivity can then be gleaned, as this final section has drawn out, from the importance that Oyeyemi attributes to reading faces. Surfaces, in these moments, do not denote simple ornamentation or invite objectification. They are instead points of access between looking individuals.

This access, however, is not readily available. A very particular kind of looking, one that is attentive and self-correcting, is required. And nor is this access total. In her study of the close-up's place in film theory, Doane outlines a counter argument to the suggestion that this compositional technique can emblemize attention:

Over and against Münsterberg's domestication and rationalization, the close-up has more frequently appeared as the mark of cinematic difference and specificity, as in Epstein's *photogénie* – the invocation of an otherwise unknown dimension, a radically defamiliarized alterity.⁵³⁶

Doane sets up an opposition between attention on the one hand, and an experience of alterity, on the other. When it comes to textual description, I don't think that there is such a firm opposition. The relationship between fictional seeing and knowing is more evasive than this. Prose description, itself not visual in the literal sense, can observe closely and at the same time preserve a sense of the considered object's mystery. Across Oyeyemi's work, characters come into view only to disappear again. Shadows, blind spots, and total invisibility all maintain a firm position in my three chosen authors' literary expositions of the visual field. And it is this ability to balance visibility and obscurity within a single whole that, I think, helps to make the novel such a valuable space for considering how visuality works.

⁵³⁶ Doane, 'The Close-Up', p. 91.

Conclusion: Showing Seeing

In her introduction to a study of the relationship between visual culture and modernist literature, Karen Jacobs summarizes the scope of visual culture studies:

The field engages new philosophies of representation, as well as developments in literary theory and art history toward the construction of new ways of thinking about visual relations, including habits of perception and the cultural construction of vision. Despite this inclusive approach, anthologies that invoke the term have had a tendency to privilege visual objects over visual discourses, but this likely reflects disciplinary habits rather than arguments. I understand the scope of this study, therefore, to be consistent within visual culture, broadly defined.⁵³⁷

Jacobs aims, somewhat tentatively it seems, to insert her own literary study into the field of visual culture theory. The suggestion is that the fictional text can aid, as ably as any visual object, our understanding of visual relations. And yet it is rarely, Jacobs suggests, enlisted to do so. Her study, written in 2001, readdresses this balance with respect to modernist literature. Sixteen years later, however, studies of visual culture remain firmly in favour of considering images over texts. And this is particularly the case when it comes to studies of contemporary visual culture.

The neglect of very contemporary fiction in this respect is in part due to the difficulties posed by the subject matter itself. Studies that tackle the relationship between modernist literature and visual culture, or the interplay of photography and Marcel Proust's fiction, for instance, have the benefit of some distance, both cultural and temporal, from the issues considered. The exact tenor of a literary period's engagement with its wider visual environment is more easily graspable when the scope of such engagement can be regarded in its entirety; recurrent tropes and governing themes emerge more clearly when seen from this vantage point. Determining the relationship between a late twentieth or early twenty-first-century novel and its contemporary image culture, by contrast, is a more complicated task. As I mentioned in the introduction to this study, while a predominance of the image is not an exclusively twenty-first-century phenomenon, our visual environment is

⁵³⁷ Karen Jacobs, *The Eye's Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), footnote to p. 4.

now changing and expanding at rate. A host of new and easily accessible ways of making and communicating pictures means that images now proliferate rapidly and travel widely. Those who engage with this complex and shifting environment need to develop correspondingly sophisticated ways of negotiating it. This means that looking practices, as well as the quantity and quality of contemporary images, are also undergoing a transformation.

Figuring out the nature of this transformation when in the midst of it is a daunting undertaking. This, I think, accounts for why comparatively few studies of visual culture focus on contemporary texts. This is where this study comes in. Its aim has been twofold. In the first instance, I have set out how a visually sensitive theoretical approach to the contemporary novel might proceed. Then, I have put this approach to use in service of the individual texts considered. An overarching point unites these two strands: the contemporary text reflects, queries, and so participates in, its wider visual culture.

The reading practice developed and deployed throughout this study is a firmly interdisciplinary one. It falls under the wider umbrella of visual studies, as it broadly follows the direction that Nicole R. Fleetwood issues in her study of the black body's visibility in American culture. 'Visual studies', Fleetwood writes, 'allows for the interpretative and contextual tools of art history to be applied to a range of cultural products and phenomena, not traditionally (or by disciplinary boundaries) deemed *objet d'art*'.⁵³⁸ Taking their cue from this methodological flexibility, my readings of the literary text have pivoted on concepts and models that are more common to art theory, than to literary criticism. My argument is for the productivity of reading the literary text with visual structures, such as the pose or the odalisque, in mind. The techniques and theoretical issues associated with visual portraiture, for instance, provide a way of grasping what Smith does with character description. Reading her fiction through the lens of portraiture sheds light on how literary description can stage conversations to do with gender and identity, and with the limitations of narrow categorization in both respects. For Smith, a sustained emulation of the strategies and techniques associated with this visual art form constitutes a solid framework within which to examine these limitations.

⁵³⁸ Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 21.

But I have also looked beyond art history for my theoretical orientation. The texts that I consider evidence a varied and wide-ranging response to the contemporary visual field. Such eclecticism demands a correspondingly adaptable critical methodology. As such, film theory, studies of ethics and representation, or psychoanalytic ideas about looking can all viably be put to use in drawing out the nuances of a given text's understanding of its wider visual environment. In this respect, this study does not bring preconceptions to bear on its subject matter, or attempt to impose a set of readings on it from the top down. Rather, through close and visually sensitive reading, it follows the direction of the individual texts themselves, and adapts its approach accordingly.

This differentiates my study from those that read the literary text in light of a single comparable visual form, photography or painting, for instance. I focus on how contemporary description responds not simply to the visual arts, but to visual culture more widely. This allows me to consider the chosen texts' intimacy with particular artistic movements or aesthetic paradigms, but it also permits me to think about harder to pin down and less material aspects of this visual-verbal interaction. Such aspects include the benefits and limitations of particular modes of looking or attention, or the ethics of rendering race or gender in visual terms.

The resultant readings have all been dedicated to drawing out the specificities of how written expression can comment on or convey visuality. Oyeyemi's work, for instance, uses specifically literary techniques to draw out race's uneasy relationship with looking and visual representation. In this author's work, a descriptive emphasis on clichéd expressions of colour is instrumental in setting out how race typically comes into view. Such readings have revealed the text to be highly flexible in terms of its response to the visual field; it can approximate visuality, but it can also parody or withdraw from it. My argument throughout has been that texts are an invaluable, and also a uniquely adaptable, resource for understanding how visual expression and experience play out in the contemporary age.

Given the mutable and expanding nature of our contemporary visual condition, I think that developing widely applicable reading strategies, rather than attempting to draw a single conclusion, is more productive at this early stage. In fact, reaching a firm consensus on the nature of vision as it plays out in any period is an impractical endeavour. Jonathan Crary stresses this point in relation to the twentieth century:

If vision can be said to have any enduring characteristics within the twentieth century, it is that it has no enduring features. Rather it is embedded in a pattern of adaptability to new technological relations, social configurations, and economic imperatives. What we familiarly refer to, for example, as film, photography and television are transient elements within an accelerating sequence of displacements and obsolescences, part of the delirious operations of modernization.⁵³⁹

Crary argues that attending to vision's nuances, along with its entanglement in wider social and economic forces, is more profitable than trying to attribute a single defining medium or viewing regime to a given period. My aim has been to read developments in vision as they happen, from the surface of contemporary literary texts.

Having said this, certain shared patterns and interests have emerged across and within the novels of my three chosen authors. In the first instance, a striking number of highly perceptive narrators and characters populate the novels of these three authors. Perhaps they are simply products of a contemporary age in which a high degree of visual literacy is the norm. But my study has suggested that these figures serve a purpose beyond this. Namely, they work to persuade the reader into a like appreciation for the look of things. They train and sensitize the reader's eye. They direct attention to appearances, and they also prompt awareness as to how images operate. In so doing, they argue that reading should also encompass a visual response. This quality is not specific to our contemporary hyper-visual cultural environment. Rather, this capacity for visuality is already latent in literary narration. As I set out in relation to Cole's fiction, narrative focalization already implies, and has an affinity with, looking. The narrator as photographer trope brings this affinity firmly into view.

This study makes one further important narratological point which, again, need not be confined to studies of twenty-first-century fiction and visual culture. Description, I claimed in the previous chapter, accommodates and drives a given text's wider thematic and theoretical concerns. For Mieke Bal, description is the motor of narrative in so far as it functions in a knowing and explanatory capacity; it unveils how narrative works.⁵⁴⁰ I argue that description is explanatory in two further

⁵³⁹ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, p. 13.

⁵⁴⁰ Bal, 'Over-Writing as Un-Writing', pp. 96-148.

senses. Firstly, descriptive passages disclose the workings and themes specific to a given text. Secondly, they serve as a window onto how that text engages with and articulates the wider cultural, and specifically visual, field. As such, description demands a more central place in any theory of the novel. And it is the first place that we should look if we are to understand how fiction archives, and queries, its wider image environment.

My stress on literary description's interrogative, as well as its archival, capacity is important here. Throughout this study, I have stressed that novels articulate their wider visual environment not simply on an aesthetic level, but also in sophisticated theoretical terms. The nature of visuality, for my three chosen authors, cannot be easily grasped; the visual field's varied functionality and impact demand cautious consideration. So while these authors express an enthusiasm for the aesthetic and representational possibilities of visual expression, they are also clear as to its limitations. And they use literary narrative as a space within which to grapple with these limitations. Visuality, in these terms, plays far more than a simply descriptive role in the literary text. The visual is a problem, as well as a source of power, for these contemporary writers. As such, it is something to be worked with, and worked upon.

I attribute a didactic impulse to these literary investigations into the visual. Cole, Smith, and Oyeyemi do not simply tell their reader that the visual field is slippery and complicated; they also propose means of negotiating it. My considered texts put forward strategies for countering the perceived failings of visual representation and interaction. They stress the precariousness of the latter, but they also try to reclaim it. That is, while they map out the outcomes of different kinds of looking, ultimately they show us how to look well. The shared suggestion is that, in spite of its failures, visuality can be an ethical space. It can, for instance, provide a support for intersubjectivity. By stressing the benefits of generous and attentive perception, these texts effectively locate responsibility as resting firmly with the viewer. This move neatly affords these novels great scope for ambiguity and nuance in their response to the visual. They can, through vibrant surface detail, endorse and delight in visual expression. But they can also step back from it and set out, on a theoretical level, its deficiencies.

While I expected that certain commonalities would arise between the novels of my three chosen authors, I did not anticipate the extent to which one particular

aspect would play a part. This study set out to consider how the contemporary text evidences its emplacement within a wider visual setting. And yet, ideas to do with invisibility or avisuality have surfaced repeatedly. As Nicholas Mirzoeff reminds us in his introduction to *The Visual Culture Reader*, any investigation into visual culture must necessarily take into account absences as well as presences, invisibility as well as visibility.⁵⁴¹ Each element feeds off and shores up the other. But this aspect alone cannot account for the frequency and urgency with which avisuality arises as a concern for my three chosen authors.

This study has suggested that the great value of literature's contribution to visual culture theory is due, in significant part, to its ability to express both visuality and invisibility. Literary description has a privileged position in respect of the image. Its capacity to be visual in figurative, but not in literal, terms means that it can comment on visual representation without itself being subject to the limitations of its visual counterpart. Unlike visual artists, writers are not committed to the visual; they choose to engage with it. And under these conditions, the visual can be explored with particular flexibility as an intellectual category. In future research, I would like to consider the contemporary novel's propensity for, and reliance upon, invisibility further. Not least, I think that the category holds particular relevance for a culture that is currently germinating new ways of thinking about identity. In the visual sphere, the binary categorizations of male or female, black or white, still have traction. Literary expression, by contrast, offers a range of possibilities for the negotiation and display of a fluid selfhood. In textual description, it is easier 'to be both', as Smith would phrase it.

I want to end with W. J. T. Mitchell's comments on the ideas and misconceptions that attach to the emergent discipline of visual studies. Mitchell describes the approach that he takes to teaching visual culture:

My aim in this course has been to overcome the veil of familiarity and self-evidence that surrounds the experience of seeing, and to turn it into a problem for analysis, a mystery to be unravelled. In doing this, I suspect that I am rather typical of those that teach this subject, and that this is the common core of our interest, however different our methods or reading lists might be. The problem is one of staging a paradox that can be formulated in a number of ways: that vision is itself invisible; that we cannot see what seeing

⁵⁴¹ Nicolas Mirzoeff, 'The Subject of Visual Culture', in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. by Nicholas Mirzoeff, 2nd edn (Routledge: London, 2002), pp. 3-23 (p. 27).

is; that the eyeball (*pace* Emerson) is never transparent. I take my task as a teacher to be to make seeing show itself, to put it on display, and make it accessible to analysis. I call this 'showing seeing', a variation on the American elementary school ritual called 'show and tell'.⁵⁴²

Broadly, Mitchell argues that the field of visual studies, or the study of visual culture, should follow his own pedagogic approach. It should aim to sensitize us 'to the wonders of visibility, practices of seeing the world and especially the seeing of other people'.⁵⁴³

Fiction, my own study has shown, has a significant role to play in this awakening. Reading the work of Cole, Smith, and Oyeyemi, a recursive relationship between text and visual context emerges that places the contemporary novel firmly in dialogue with its wider visual environment. Prose fiction ably understands the issues and qualities that define the contemporary image field; and it reflects these issues internally, on a comprehensive aesthetic and theoretical level. As such, any theorist of visual culture should also direct his or her attention to the literary text, as it has much to contribute in terms of our understanding of the relationship that we have with the visual. The contemporary novel is well placed to 'show seeing'.

⁵⁴² W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Showing Seeing', p. 166.

⁵⁴³ Mitchell, 'Showing Seeing', p. 166.

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