'L'invisible voyeur du monde des voyants': Critiques of French society in Michel Tournier's *La Goutte d'or* and Guy Hocquenghem's *L'Amour en relief*.

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Short title: Literary Critiques of Contemporary French Society.

Since decolonisation, the increase in immigration from France's former colonies in North Africa has prompted metropolitan writers to reconsider conceptions of French society. In their novels, Tournier and Hocquenghem present contemporary France through the defamiliarising eyes of a North African immigrant who serves as a device for the critique of French culture. This article investigates the opposition between the objectifying culture of the West, and the immigrants' desert culture. It argues that this opposition is flawed, and that the division is between actual practices of seeing and the cultural discourses around vision.

Depuis la décolonisation, l'augmentation du taux d'immigration en provenance des pays du Maghreb a poussé les auteurs de la métropole à modifier leur vision de la société française. Dans leurs romans, Tournier et Hocquenghem présentent la France contemporaine, vue par un immigré maghrébin au regard défamiliarisant qui sert de vecteur à la critique de la société française. Cet article observe l'opposition entre la culture occidentale réifiante, et la culture des gens du désert, tout en démontrant que cette opposition est fausse et que la division se situe entre le regard effectif et le discours théorique du regard.

Keywords: France, image, immigrants, postcolonial, vision.

In the years since the process of decolonisation was initiated, Europe has been turned inside out by a number of factors. Not least of these is the wave of immigration from the former colonies experienced by many European countries. While the specificities of this experience have varied significantly, in many cases this migration from the Periphery to the Centre has prompted debates around national identity. This article assesses these issues in relation to France, the increase in immigration from its former colonies in North Africa, and the resulting questions of intercultural relations. It looks at how two metropolitan authors have responded to these social changes, reconsidering conceptions of French society in the tradition of Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721), in which a pair of fictional Persians travel to Paris and record their impressions of French culture in a series of letters. Over two hundred years later, this model is re-employed in a postcolonial context, juxtaposing the cultures of East and West, and presenting contemporary France at a distance through the defamiliarising eyes of a North African immigrant. The article investigates this device of borrowing the immigrant's eyes, and examines the role of the senses in perceptions and characterisations of different cultures, and the implications of this for intercultural communication.

The texts here are Michel Tournier's *La Goutte d'or* (1986) and Guy Hocquenghem's *L'Amour en relief* (1982). Both novels centre on a journey. In the former, the Berber shepherd Idriss leaves his desert oasis in search of the blonde French tourist who has taken his photograph and failed to send him a copy of it. The first half of the novel follows his journey through Algeria to Paris, while the second half deals with his experiences there as a street-sweeper, extra in a television advertisement, model for shop mannequins and construction worker. *L'Amour en*

relief follows a similar trajectory and then continues far beyond, as the Tunisian boy Amar, blinded by an accident caused by French tourists, goes first to Rome and Paris, and then on to America, where he becomes, successively, a gigolo to an aged widow, Mrs. Halloween, a blind surfer by day and prostitute by night, and a dancer. Finally, after being convicted of drug trafficking, he is forced to become an unwilling subject in scientific trials which lead to the forced restoration of his sight through the implantation into his skull of a camera, which transforms him into a cyborg. This article first examines the ways in which the authors characterise the two cultures in question, as they see, and are seen by, the immigrant protagonists. It then considers the objectifying power of images and the gaze, and looks at the intellectual tradition of sight.[1] Finally, it demonstrates how the novels serve to defamiliarise conceptions of the gaze in postmodernist criticism, showing that it is not vision which objectifies, but the visionaries.

Tournier: the West and the Rest

Tournier sets about revealing French culture through the eyes of his Berber immigrant, thereby creating a mode of distantiation which forces the reader to reconsider scenarios which otherwise would remain invisible. Like Montesquieu, Tournier achieves this distance by developing a detailed portrayal of the non-Western culture, which occupies the first half of the novel. This functions as a means of comparison with the West, a norm which the author uses to undermine the reader's own ethnocentric tendencies. The world of Idriss's oasis settlement,

Tabelbala, is stripped bare, reduced to the essentials, and the deaths of his friend Ibrahim and his camel serve to remind that life here can be unpredictable, brutal and short. The uncertainty of the environment demands that individuals retain what control they can, through superstition and tradition. Consequently, the news that Idriss has allowed his photograph to be taken by a tourist is greeted with horror and the warning: 'C'est un peu de toi qui est parti' (Tournier, 1986: 22), 'Part of you has gone'.[2] The image here is feared, for its power to bring misfortune upon the individual who fails to control it.

In contrast, the power of the image dominates French culture. Once arrived, Idriss finds himself subjected to totalising discourses about the desert which, arbitrary and meaningless to him, place him in the ironic situation of having to be taught the 'real' meanings of 'le Sahara' and 'le couscous'. As an exotic subject he is commoditised, like the notion of the oasis which is appropriated as a soft drink brand name, 'Palmeraie', and the camel which is bought to be filmed with him in a television commercial, only to be sent to the abattoir afterwards. The reifying effect of being reduced to an image is powerfully demonstrated when Idriss is paid to act as a mannequin model, a process in which he loses eyebrows and eyelashes, and is nearly buried alive in a vat of resin. It is only when he refuses to become a robotised figure alongside the mannequins of himself that the destructive imaging trend is halted.

Tournier thus establishes a rigid binary opposition between the desert and the West. While the West considers the image as integral to cultural processes such as communication and memory, for the desert it is something to be feared and rejected, intimately linked with the colonising process. This is shown in the attitudes to

Idriss's experience of being photographed by a blonde French female tourist. While the tourist leaves with her souvenir, a record of her authentic holiday experience, Idriss is conscious of having been gazed upon and objectified by the camera's lens. Although the tourist's belief that this is an acceptable, harmless encounter is shared by the Marseilles prostitute who takes Idriss's golden pendant, and all of the businessmen who pay Idriss in return for using him, Idriss lives these encounters as a series of exploitations which he is powerless to resist. The French characters are oblivious to the consequences of their behaviour; however, through Idriss's experiences, Tournier offers a series of alternative interpretations.

Tournier contrasts the dominance of the image with the power of the sign, the pure abstract form which has no intrinsic meaning because it represents nothing. This is most clearly evidenced in the 'goutte d'or' pendant worn and lost by Zett Zobeida.

> Que Zett Zobeida et sa goutte d'or soient l'émanation d'un monde sans image, l'antithèse et peut-être l'antidote de la femme platinée à l'appareil de photo, Idriss commença peut-être à le soupçonner ce soir-là.' (Tournier, 1986: 31).
>
> 'It was that evening that Idriss perhaps began to suspect that Zett Zobeida and her golden droplet were the issue of a world without images, the antithesis and perhaps the antidote to the platinum blonde with the camera.'

In addition to opposing it to the image, Tournier proposes the sign as a means of overcoming the metaphorical blindness with which Idriss is afflicted. As Lynn Salkin Sbiroli (1995: 117) points out, Idriss's blindness is paralleled by the sight defects suffered by his various would-be mentors: Ibrahim the nomad has only one eye, the photographer Mustapha is short-sighted, Lala Ramirez has the unblinking eyes of a snake, and Mage the film director has a squint. None is able to offer Idriss guidance, and the poverty of their advice is contrasted with the momentary flash of insight

from the blind man at Oum Kalsoum's concert, who suddenly sees the singer as the colour green. While those with visual defects struggle to make sense of a reality constituted by images, the mythic blind seer is touched by the power of the spoken word. This suggests that although the image may dominate, its antidotes, the abstract sign and spoken word of the desert, wield a certain power.

Tournier develops his dichotomy through the two oral tales which frame the body of the novel. Both concern the defusing of the power of the image through its transformation into a series of signs. In the story of the 'blonde Queen', a calligrapher succeeds in defusing the power of a portrait whose beauty drives its viewers to obsession, by re-rendering it as a series of calligraphic signs in Arabic script. In the tale of Barberousse, a painter struggling to create a regal image of the pirate-king succeeds by commissioning a tapestry in which the traits of the king are represented and simultaneously dissimulated by the colours of an autumnal European forest. Under close examination, the image of the king dissolves into a series of pictorial signs: squirrels, foxes and deer under the autumn trees.

While the story of the 'blonde Queen' demonstrates the dangerous power of the image, and suggests the dominant role of the visual, the tale of 'Barberousse' suggests that the other senses also have a role to play. Approaching his tapestry portrait, the king becomes aware that its materiality is designed not only to be seen, but to be touched and even smelled. The wild softness of its wool communicates the story of its natural origins through the senses without resorting to sight or image. This suggests that Tournier is setting up a multi-dimensional system of oppositions, most obviously between image and sign, but equally between vision and other

senses, and arguably between civilised West and desert Other. A similar structure is also found in Hocquenghem's work.

Hocquenghem: Parallel Worlds

In contrast to Tournier's desert opening, Hocquenghem's text begins with a description of post-1968 France. The reader enters a world of hedonism, feminism, consumerism and the new sexual revolution, where the focus is on illusions, appearance and hypocrisy. Here, image is key to status and success, and surfaces take precedence over substance. However, no sooner has Hocquenghem illustrated and acknowledged the centrality of image within French society, than he challenges it by causing his teenage protagonist, Amar, to be permanently blinded. In doing so he raises questions about how an image-obsessed society deals with individuals who cannot participate in this discourse. Amar is forced to perceive the world in terms of his remaining senses, by developing an entirely new system for perceiving his environment. Amar's elderly mistress, Mrs. Halloween, is responsible for this, teaching him to use his body as a machine with such success that he refers to the period of her education as his second birth. Touch becomes central to his perception: not only his digits but the skin of his entire body becomes a means of interacting with the world, both touching and being touched. The world is experienced in relief, as embodied matter rather than as projected simulation. For Amar, then, the logical way to know someone and to be known completely is through sex:

> Mon seul moyen de vraiment 'connaître' des gens, de pouvoir m'en former une 'image mentale', est de palper leur corps entier. Et le plus simple, pour parvenir à ce but, est de faire l'amour avec eux. (Hocquenghem, 1982: 44).
>
> My only way of really 'knowing' people, of being able to form a 'mental image' of them, is to feel their entire body. And the simplest way to achieve this is to make love with them.

The meanings associated with sex, at least on Amar's part, are thus radically altered. By removing the dominance of the image, sex becomes a way of knowing people without the prejudice of either age or gender, enabling Amar to sleep with both men and women. For his grateful clients, sleeping with him represents an escape from the tyranny of the image, from the fear of aesthetic judgement.

Hocquenghem here is drawing on the tradition of philosophical blindness treated in Diderot's *Lettre sur les aveugles* (1749), which differentiates between the morality of the sighted and the blind. Amar's perceptual system is so radically different from that of the sighted that it raises questions about the nature of what it is that he perceives. He repeatedly refers to it as an alternative reality, existing in parallel to the sighted world:

> Au fond, mon monde ne coïncide avec celui des voyants qu'au prix d'un gigantesque malentendu: je ne saurai jamais si je touche les mêmes objets qu'ils voient. (Hocquenghem, 1982: 48)
>
> Comme tous les voyants, vous ne comprenez pas que nous ne parlons pas du même monde, quand nous employons les mêmes mots. Nous sommes deux univers parallèles, qui coïncident parfois (Hocquenghem, 1982: 211-2).
>
> Fundamentally, my world only coincides with that of the sighted at the cost of a gigantic misunderstanding : I will never know if I am touching the same objects that they see.
>
> Like all sighted people, you don't understand that we are not talking about the same world, when we use the same words. We are two parallel universes, which coincide sometimes.

The structure of these parallel worlds bears resemblances to the multi-dimensional system of oppositions constructed by Tournier.

Following his accident, Amar comes to consider himself 'moins l'aveugle que l'invisible voyeur du monde des voyants' (Hocquenghem, 1982: 71), 'less a blind person than like the invisible voyeur of the sighted world'. Although he is, to an extent, aware of attitudes towards his blindness, it is through a reading device called the Optacon that he gains access to the writings of the sighted population, and its wider views on the blind. His readings soon convince him that the sighted view the blind with pity and revulsion.

Amar's feelings are given in an impassioned speech prepared but never delivered to the jury which convicts him of drug trafficking and has him sentenced to two hundred and forty-six years in jail. In it he deplores not the loss of his liberty, because this is a spectacle prized by the sighted, but the moral rules and norms which the sighted world imposes on him but which to him, as to Idriss, are entirely arbitrary. The court is unable to accept that he has smuggled fourteen kilos of heroin despite his refusal to deny it; it reasons that rather than being a blind criminal, he must simply be faking his blindness. While his blindness is proven, the prosecutor accuses him of exploiting the respect accorded to the infirm. Amar concludes,

> Vous étiez prêts à beaucoup me pardonner, sauf de détruire l'image de pureté aveugle que vous vous faisiez des miens […] Vous m'avez condamné sans pitié parce que j'ai trahi mon rôle (Hocquenghem, 1982: 214; 215)
>
> You were ready to forgive me much, except destroying the image of blind purity which you created about my kind […] You condemned me without mercy because I transgressed my role.

Like Camus's Meursault before him, Amar's crime is to have broken the codes and norms which constitute the fabric of society. Marginalised on multiple

fronts by his ethnicity, disability, and sexuality, he nonetheless maintains his refusal to conform to the culture around him.

Characterisations of Sight

France in *La Goutte d'or* and the West in *L'Amour en relief* is a world designed for the eye, where the discourse of images bears an arbitrary but defining relation to meaning, and reality is as transparent, superficial and flat as Baudrillard's simulacra suggests. It is a world where the other senses are restricted and denied, subordinated to the hegemony of the visual through the glass of a television screen, the perspex of a jeweller's window, or the transparent barrier of the peep show. Tournier's Hexagon demonstrates the obsession with simulation and consumerism of which the Parisian intellectual milieu habitually accuses America. Hocquenghem makes a similar point: there is little to separate the judgements and practices of his Paris from the spectacle-obsessed America. Idriss and Amar find themselves commoditised as spectacle, either in television advertisements, or as the blind surfer, blind dancer, or blind gigolo. To assess the significance of this, it is useful to consider these practices within the context of historical discourses around vision.

Since Plato and Aristotle, vision has occupied a privileged position among the senses. The anthropologist of perception, Tim Ingold (2000: 247), notes the insistence on the primacy of sight, evidenced by Descartes' assertion that 'sight is the noblest and most comprehensive of the senses', especially in comparison with the so-called bodily senses of touch, taste and smell. Vision and observation have

historically served as the primary instrument of objective knowledge, supported by Hannah Arendt when she argues that 'from the very outset, in formal philosophy, thinking has been thought of in terms of *seeing*' (Arendt 1978: 110-111). Linguistic support for this comes from the Indo-European root 'weid-' from which the verbs 'to see' and 'to know' derive in various languages (Buck, 1949: 1041). Moreover, Rojek and Urry (1997: 5) note that the primacy of the visual also exists in contemporary culture, where the privileging of the visual in contemporary tourist practices appears to parallel the ocularcentrism of Western philosophy.

However, feminists, such as Rose (1986) and Pollock (1988), have drawn attention to the consequences of Western cultural practices of sight, as they have with many of the characteristics of the Enlightenment. Their argument that the gaze in Western culture has been defined in terms of masculine hegemony, where the observing eye is characterised as male and the female (body) is positioned as observed object or spectacle, is relevant here in light of the tendency for the colonised to be conceptualised in feminine terms. The visual is thus linked to the phallogocentric imperial systems of power and domination, such as Foucault's panopticon. According to Luce Irigaray (1978: 50), this emphasis on the visual comes at the expense of the other senses:

> More than other senses, the eye objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, and maintains a distance. […] In our culture the predominance of the look over the smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations. The moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality.

This loss of materiality can be seen throughout *La Goutte d'or*, as bodily substance is replaced by the image. This is most notable in the instance of the shop mannequins,

where the mannequin collector tells Idriss of his habit of photographing his mannequins in natural situations. His pleasure in the resultant 'image of an image' derives from the way in which the juxtaposition of image and reality undermines the reality of the landscape itself (Tournier, 1986: 181). This contrasts with *L'Amour en relief*, which in this sense is the opposite of Idriss's photograph: it is about re-embodiment and materiality, the restoration of the flesh to the space often occupied by the image.

Historically, therefore, attitudes towards vision have been ambivalent: it has traditionally been regarded as rational, detached and analytical, whilst more recently being accused of being reductive and objectifying. The ills of modern Western civilisation, including its tendency to individualism, have been blamed on the obsession with vision, in part because vision is seen as defining the self individually in opposition to others (Ingold, 2000: 247). The distrust of vision can be linked to a suspicion of writing, which since Plato and Aristotle has, in the Western tradition, been seen as a pale imitation of the immediacy and reality of the spoken word. In his work on the relationship between vision and hearing, Ingold (2000: 243-287) shows how this attitude towards writing persists in modern scholarship. According to McLuhan (1962), Gutenberg's invention of the printing press was the catalyst for radically altering attitudes towards writing and speech in favour of the former and its dependence on the eye. However, he argues (McLuhan, 1962: 28) that this change did not take place among indigenous peoples whose cultures remained at the level of 'oral-aural' emphasis, with an associated emphasis on the privileged position of the hearing ear. Supported by anthropological studies, and in a manner not dissimilar to Tournier and Hocquenghem, McLuhan thus identifies the apparent opposition

between vision and hearing with a Centre-Periphery dichotomy. Walter Ong (1982: 73-4) developed this position further by attributing moral characteristics to the dominant senses, suggesting that while oral culture demonstrates 'aggregative (harmonizing) tendencies', vision shows 'analytic, dissecting' characteristics. A sound-dominated economy is people-focused, binding them into community, whereas vision centres on abstract, impersonal things.

Ong goes on to assert that the listener in an oral culture, who has never seen writing, will receive the sounds of spoken language as sound: 'In a primary oral culture, […] the word has its existence only in sound, with no reference whatsoever to any visually perceptible text, and no awareness of even the possibility of such a text.' (Ong, 1982: 73). As Ingold (2000: 248) points out, in his contention that the listener in a 'primarily oral' culture hears words *as sound*, rather than as images shaped in sound, Ong takes issue with Saussure. Thus, just as we do not see 'light', but only the objects it illuminates, so we do not hear the sounds of language, but perceive them ready-formed into words (Ong, 1982: 11). Writing thus transforms our perception of the word rather than simply representing it, as Saussure thought. Ong presents this apparent lack within oral cultures as a positive, since it allows them to escape the dominance of the objectifying visual and maintain the positivity of aural privileging. In doing so, he reiterates the opposition between vision and writing, and orality and speech.

Binaries Undone

This raises questions about what the two novels are doing, in their contemporary reworking of Montesquieu's tradition. Are they simply using their North African travellers to critique Western culture for being dominated by the reifying tendencies of the gaze? Or proposing that peripheral cultures are somehow superior, because they offer alternatives such as the sign, hearing and speech? In his work on speech and writing, Derrida (1976) questions Saussure's binary notion of the 'natural order of relationships between linguistic and graphic signs' based on 'a natural bond of sense to the senses [which] passes from sense to sound' (Derrida 1976: 35). He goes on to show that since speech is shown to be as material as writing, and so subject to the same forces of deferral and difference, the notion of writing simply as representation of speech is disrupted. 'Writing is not a sign of a sign, except if one says it of all signs, which would be more profoundly true' (Derrida 1976: 43).

Although it would be difficult to overestimate Derrida's influence in this area, a closer look at the novels suggests that they also destabilise the sensual binary which they initially appear to propose. Both Tournier and Hocquenghem contradict Ong's suggestion that writing is the only visible representation of language. Amar uses a series of pressure codings, applied either under his fingers or, in the case of the Optacon, against his back in order to build up a 'presque image' (Hocquenghem, 1982: 174) 'a near-image' of the written language which he cannot see. In Tournier's story of the 'blonde Queen', the image is deconstructed by the calligrapher who painstakingly describes a series of signs which are not the representation of sounds, but are rather the traces of gestures which become parts of an image. Their experiences may be outside of written culture, but this does not impede their

accessing of language, any more than the sign language of a deaf person prevents them from communicating. This finding suggests that the characterising of cultures in terms of the dominant sense is a crude device, and that the relationship between Western and indigenous cultures may be more complex than the apparent binary opposition would suggest.

It is also useful to investigate the main charge laid against visual perception. David Levin (1988: 65) outlines the claim succinctly – 'Vision is the most reifying of all our perceptual modalities' – and asserts that the hegemony of the visual in modern society can be linked to a will to power, technoscientific exploitation and political surveillance. While Levin's list of evils reads like a roll-call of the experiences to which Amar is subjected, this does not necessarily make a conclusive case for the inherently objectifying nature of vision. Ingold (2000: 272) points to the reciprocity of vision as a key component in identity:

> your visibility, your identity, indeed your very existence as a person, is confirmed in the sight of others.[…] But when the other person is blind the reciprocity of vision breaks down. […] [N]ot being able to see the faces of others leads you to imagine that others, conversely, cannot see you. Hull [1997: 51-2] vividly describes the nagging fear of having no face, the loss of consciousness associated with perceived invisibility. 'Because I cannot see, I cannot be seen […] Being invisible to others, I become invisible to my self.' […] For him, quite contrary to conventional wisdom, vision personifies, whereas sound objectifies.

Aspects of this reciprocity of vision, and the implications for identity when reciprocity is interrupted, are present in various forms throughout *L'Amour en relief*. We see it in Larry, the Nobel-winning scientist who, unable to recognise faces, forces his wife to dress in canary yellow so that he can identify her. As a consequence, he is surrounded by perpetual strangers and incapable of emotional

development, which arguably facilitates his grim experiments, first on frogs and chimpanzees, and later on Amar, his human subject.

Most fundamentally, however, the personification due to vision is evident in the way in which Amar has to adapt following his blindness. Prior to his accident his relationships were based on sight; he knew people through seeing them. Following his accident, he is forced to find a new means of knowing people. The unconventional nature of his chosen method, through full-body touch and ultimately sex, which is perhaps the most striking aspect of the novel, is testament to the fact that, contrary to tradition, in everyday practice vision in fact personifies rather than objectifies.

The conclusion drawn from these examples must be that there is a dichotomy, but it is not a divide between vision and other senses. The supposed hegemony of vision does not preclude the symbolic value of other senses within Western culture, examples of which include the ringing of church bells, the sounding of horns or sirens, or the smells of incense during Mass. Rather, the division is between the actual practices of seeing, and the cultural discourses around vision, which has its roots in the Cartesian dualism of nature and culture. As Ingold (2000: 282-3) argues

> it is not vision that objectifies the world, but rather the harnessing of vision to a project of objectification that has reduced it to an instrument of disinterested observation.[…] At the heart of this approach is a representationalist theory of knowledge [which] rests on a fundamental distinction between physical and cultural dimensions of perception, the former having to do with the registration of sensations by the body and brain, the latter with the construction of representations in the mind.

Analysis of the texts suggests a similar disconnect between the way that seeing practices are carried out in *L'Amour en relief*, and the way in which visual symbolism functions in both texts. If vision itself does not automatically objectify, objectification must be caused by the tradition into which visual practices are symbolically appropriated. What we are left with, then, is 'a critique of modernity dressed up as a critique of the hegemony of vision.'(Ingold, 2000: 287).

What is under attack in *La Goutte d'or*, and *L'Amour en relief*, then, rather than image or vision *per se*, is the functioning of French modernity and its discourses. These include the tendency to individualism, to objectification and to the commoditisation of identities and persons. What is beyond the scope of the present article is a discussion of the ethics with which French writers, in order to create the distancing effect necessary for a critique of their own society, have borrowed the eyes of former colonial subjects. In doing so, it is conceivable that, while the dichotomy between vision and the other senses has been undermined, the arguably more fundamental opposition between Self and Other, remains, although problematised by the dissolution of the arguments around sight. If the North African subject must remain fixed in his otherness, reaffirming the primacy of the West, then from the perspective of these novelists writing in the 1980s, the argument that Europe has been turned 'inside out' by the process of decolonisation would appear not yet to have been conclusively made.

[1] Feminists have argued that in Western culture the gaze has been defined in terms of masculine hegemony, where the observing eye is characterised as male and the female body is positioned as observed object or spectacle.
[2] All translations are the author's own.

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