

Seeing is Believing: Power and the Gaze in Charles Dickens's *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*

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Behind the misleadingly singular term 'the gaze' a set of disparate and at best loosely related bodies of theory can be found sheltering. Within present-day social psychology the term has a purchase that is more literal than metaphorical, and makes reference to studies of looking behaviour in groups and dyads, often focussing upon the varieties of such behaviour that are appropriate to different social circumstances or that are associated with individuals from different social or cultural backgrounds. Within the humanities, and especially within literary or film studies, the term evokes a complex body of theory emanating from a number of sources. First amongst these is Michel Foucault's metaphorical extension of Jeremy Bentham's 'Panopticon', an extension used to describe that condition of internalized surveillance to be found (according to Foucault) at the heart of modern western culture.¹ A more diffuse tradition that develops Jacques Lacan's critique of Jean-Paul Sartre is represented in its most influential manifestation by Laura Mulvey's 1975 article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. Mulvey attempts to link looking behaviour in the classic Hollywood film with forms of gendered audience identification and viewpoint – and further with the ideological position that these support.²

¹ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. First publ. in French 1975. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979, pp. 195–201.

² Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. First publ. 1975; written 1973. Reprinted in Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London, Macmillan, 1989, 14–26. For Sartre and Lacan, see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. First published in French 1943; first published in English 1958. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. London: Methuen, 1969, pp. 258–97, and Lacan, Jacques, *The*

From these and other roots has grown a critical tradition that typically relates the forms of looking depicted within texts to aspects of the narrative positioning of readers or viewers, and also to techniques of ideological interpellation. The tradition is not without its critics; in her recent book *The Distinction of Fiction* (1999), for example, Dorrit Cohn has a concluding chapter entitled 'Optics and Power in the Novel' in which she builds on Gérard Genette's dismissal of the term 'omniscience' as inappropriate to discussion of fictional narrative. Cohn argues that

such terms as 'surveillance,' 'discourse of power,' or 'panoptic vision' make sense only when they are applied to relationships that are potentially reversible: master/slave (cf. Hegel), police/criminal, prison-guard/prisoner, parent/child, teacher/pupil, man/woman, and many more. They make no sense at all – no Foucauldian sense, at any rate – when they are applied to an author's (or heterodiegetic narrator's) relationship to his fictional characters.³

One of the things that this leaves out is the *reader's* relationship to fictional characters. A narrator who sees into the hearts and souls of characters acts as a reader surrogate, allowing the reader to assume a perspective on these fictional beings that is impossible with real people. Cohn's cold logic also leaves out an element testified to by author after author – that sense of characters' independence of their creator. (Were we to accept Genette's and Cohn's injunctions we would presumably also have to stop talking about – for example – an author's or narrator's sympathy for a character or characters.) And, finally, Cohn's argument fails fully to engage with the way in which the relationship between author and/or narrator and characters can

Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. Trans. Jacques-Alain Miller. First published in French 1973, and in English 1977. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979, pp. 67–90.

³ Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, p. 171. For Genette's dissatisfaction with 'omniscience', see Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988, p. 74.

model and evoke actual or desired forms of relationship between institutions of political power and the subjects of that power in the larger extra-fictional world.

In the present article I will seek to establish that in one text (Charles Dickens's *The Adventures of Oliver Twist* – henceforth just *Oliver Twist*) – there are links between (i) looking relations in the novel (between characters), (ii) the ways in which readers are situated by the narrative in relation to characters by a particular set of narrative choices ('point of view'), and (iii) an ideological agenda that seeks to underwrite new methods of social knowledge and control in the England of the 1830s (*Oliver Twist* was first published 1837–9).

References to looking and to the eye in *Oliver Twist*⁴ have small chance of functioning as dead metaphors; the novel is crammed with acts of literal looking and seeing, and with descriptions of material eyes and physical faces.⁵ Characters exchange glances and they avert their eyes, they spy upon one another and they read each other's expressions, they attempt to deceive but reveal the truth through their looks and their countenances. When we are told of Mr Bumble's relation to the paupers, subsequent to his marriage to Mrs Corney, that he 'was degraded in their eyes' (328) the phrase has a literal force: we witness Bumble actually being looked at and mocked by the paupers. Shortly after this humbling, Monks, 'looking keenly into Mr Bumble's eyes', asks Bumble: 'You have the same eye to your own interest, that you always had, I doubt not?' (330). Mr Bumble's eyes are indeed literally devoted to the pursuit of his own interest. The very many idioms involving sight and the eyes ('strike me blind', 'before my very eyes', 'damn your eyes') that the novel contains have a force on the literal plane of meaning as well as on their more familiar metaphorical one. Take for example

⁴ All references are to Charles Dickens, *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*. Ed. Peter Fairclough. Introduction by Angus Wilson. Reprint of Penguin English Library edition, 1966. Penguin Classics. London: Penguin, 1985. Page numbers are given in brackets after quotations.

⁵ An electronic search of the Chadwyck-Healy database of the text gives 289 hits for <eye*> in *Oliver Twist*, the overwhelming majority of which are for 'eye' and 'eyes'. This is high even for Dickens, whose novels consistently make repeated reference to eyes and seeing.

the following comment: 'I promise you that in that case, if the truth is forced from him, there the matter will rest; there must be circumstances in Oliver's little history which it would be painful to drag before the public eye, and if the truth is once elicited, they shall go scot free' (412). The final court-room scene involving Fagin's trial demonstrates that in the world of *Oliver Twist* 'the public eye' is not a dead metaphor: it involves being looked at, in public, by lots of eyes.

In view of the fact that metaphors involving looking and the eye are so relentlessly exposed to the pressure of the literal, it might be expected that *Oliver Twist* is a novel that keeps us close to the truth of the physical world, of those 'facts' that Dickens was later to treat with such suspicion and disdain in *Hard Times* (1854). But literalism is not the same as truth, nor are the literal-minded immune from fanciful beliefs or ideological confusions. Indeed, as *Hard Times* demonstrates, those committed to the primacy of hard facts are likely to be more rather than less subject to misperceptions and blindnesses. At the heart of *Oliver Twist* lies a fundamentally ideological belief in the power of the eye to both perceive and display the truth. It is ideological because it is based upon what Dickens would like to be the case rather than upon what he has observed is the case. Time and time again in the novel characters perceive truths by literally seeing something; time and time again characters reveal and display the truth of their own character, personality, history, and morality through their eyes and in their faces. In a world full of secrecies and immensely complex chains of mediation (in space as well as in time), we are assured that the truth can nevertheless be *seen*.

First published in 1837–9, the novel engages with and reflects a society moving from the basic unit of the small, rural community to a domination by the sprawling urban conglomeration, and at its ideological heart lies the implicit claim that what we can term the 'moral technology' of this new order is identical to that of the old: in both orders, direct interpersonal contact between two individuals mediated by the eye is what makes it possible to distinguish good from evil, and truth from falsehood. The only words that are given

to Oliver's mother prior to her death in the opening pages of the novel are, 'Let me see the child, and die' (46). Her request is granted, and her seeing initiates a chain of looks that allow evil to be exposed and right to triumph by the end of the novel. But if the humanist ideology which underpins *Oliver Twist* rests on a belief that the ills of the big city and of a new urban society can be solved by those interpersonal skills developed in a now obsolescent pre-industrial society, it nevertheless has to offer some explanation as to how these traditional skills and their moral accoutrements can be adapted to the England of the 1830s. The substantially increased potential for secrecy to be found in the big city must be challenged by a vastly increased force of looking and surveillance, by a benevolent but in the last resort despotic system of panoptical knowledge attained through spying. Paradoxically, then, in arguing for the old, Dickens's novel is forced to underwrite some rather new forms of surveillance and control.

That insistence upon the bedrock of the literal that we find in *Oliver Twist* thus has its forward-looking and its backward-looking aspects. On the one hand it measures the life of the expanding urban and industrial England against a morality based on direct human interpersonal contact – and finds it lacking. But on the other hand its assertion that moral truths founded upon and emanating from such interpersonal contact are adequate to the task of regulating behaviour in the London of the 1830s is nostalgic and idealistic.

A window on the soul

In chapter 14 of the novel Mr Brownlow notices that Oliver surveys the shelves of books in his house (which reach 'from the floor to the ceiling') with curiosity, and he makes Oliver a promise: "You shall read them, if you behave well," said the old gentleman kindly; "and you will like that, better than looking at the outsides, – that is, in some cases; because there *are* books of which the backs and covers are by far the best parts" (145). But if the literal truth of the saying that one cannot tell a book from its cover appears here to be asserted, its more usual metaphorical implication is not: so far as the

characters of the novel are concerned, truths about their moral and existential selves *can* generally be read from their physical appearances, and, especially, from their faces and their eyes, and the tales told by faces and eyes are implicitly believed. Thus at the workhouse, when after three months of starvation a tall boy hints to his companions that ‘unless he had another basin of gruel per diem, he was afraid he might some night happen to eat the boy who slept next him, who happened to be a weakly youth of tender age’, the response of his companions is revealing. ‘He had a wild, hungry eye; and they implicitly believed him’ (56).

Much more seriously, in one of the best-known scenes in the novel, it is what can be read from Oliver’s face by the ‘old gentleman’ magistrate rather than anything that Oliver says that saves him from being signed over to the horrifying Mr Gamfield.

‘And this man that’s to be his master – you, sir – you’ll treat him well, and feed him, and do all that sort of thing, will you?’ said the old gentleman.

‘When I says I will, I means I will,’ replied Mr Gamfield doggedly.

‘You’re a rough speaker, my friend, but you look an honest, open-hearted man,’ said the old gentleman: turning his spectacles in the direction of the candidate for Oliver’s premium, whose villainous countenance was a regular stamped receipt for cruelty. But the magistrate was half blind and half childish, so he couldn’t reasonably be expected to discern what other people did.

‘I hope I am, sir,’ said Mr Gamfield, with an ugly leer.

‘I have no doubt you are, my friend,’ replied the old gentleman, fixing his spectacles more firmly on his nose, and looking about him for the inkstand.

It was the critical moment of Oliver's fate. If the inkstand had been where the old gentleman thought it was, he would have dipped his pen into it, and signed the indentures, and Oliver would have been straightway hurried off. But, as it chanced to be immediately under his nose, it followed, as a matter of course, that he looked all over his desk for it, without finding it; and happening in the course of his search to look straight before him, his gaze encountered the pale and terrified face of Oliver Twist: who, despite all the admonitory looks and pinches of Bumble, was regarding the repulsive countenance of his future master with a mingled expression of horror and fear, too palpable to be mistaken, even by a half-blind magistrate. (65)

Even such an inadequate observer as the old gentleman – whose need for glasses and his literal short-sightedness ('half-blind') is clearly equated with moral and human short-sightedness – is forced to read the truth written on Oliver's face, just as Oliver has read the message so clearly displayed in Gamfield's visage. Not so very long after this scene takes place, even the morally corrupt beadle is similarly affected by Oliver's face and the undeniable truth of that which it displays: 'Mr Bumble regarded Oliver's piteous and helpless look with some astonishment for a few seconds; hemmed three or four times in a husky manner; and, after muttering something about "that troublesome cough," bade Oliver dry his eyes and be a good boy' (73).

Not only does Oliver's look reveal an incontrovertible truth: it is also possessed of existential moral force, a force which imposes a human and moral burden upon whoever observes it – even if that someone is Mr Bumble. We are not surprised to learn, shortly after this exchange, of Mr Sowerby's view that Oliver 'would make a delightful mute' (79). A child with such an expressive face hardly needs the power of speech.

Oliver Twist offers several instances of what was to become a recognizable topos in Dickens's fiction: the face (actual or represented)

which presents a message at first only partially decoded by a puzzled observer.

‘There is something in that boy’s face,’ said the old gentleman to himself as he walked slowly away, tapping his chin with the cover of the book, in a thoughtful manner; ‘something that touches and interests me. *Can* he be innocent? He looked like. – By the bye,’ exclaimed the old gentleman, halting very abruptly, and staring up into the sky, ‘God bless my soul! Where have I seen something like that look before?’

After musing for some minutes, the old gentleman walked, with the same meditative face, into a back ante-room opening from the yard; and there, retiring into a corner, called up before his mind’s eye a vast amphitheatre of faces over which a dusky curtain had hung for many years. ‘No,’ said the old gentleman, shaking his head; ‘it must be imagination.’

He wandered over them again. He had called them into view, and it was not easy to replace the shroud that had so long concealed them. There were the faces of friends, and foes, and of many that had been almost strangers peering intrusively from the crowd; there were the faces of young and blooming girls that were now old women; there were others that the grave had changed to ghastly trophies of death, but which the mind, superior to its power, still dressed in their old freshness and beauty, calling back the lustre of the eyes, the brightness of the smile, the beaming of the soul through its mask of clay, and whispering of beauty beyond the tomb, changed but to be heightened, and taken from earth only to be set up as a light, to shed a soft and gentle glow upon the path to Heaven. (119)

‘[T]he beaming of the soul through its mask of clay’ is, on a literal level, the recalling of a person’s soul after their death by means of a picturing of their face, but given the conventional association of ‘clay’ with ‘flesh’ the phrase also suggests that the face is indeed a window through which the truth of the soul can shine.

Even the distortions and corruptions of the face have their own story to tell. In *The Three Cripples Inn*, we are told, it

was curious to observe some faces which stood out prominently from among the group. There was the chairman himself, (the landlord of the house,) a coarse, rough, heavy built fellow, who, while the songs were proceeding, rolled his eyes hither and thither, and, seeming to give himself up to joviality, had an eye for everything that was done, and an ear for everything that was said – and sharp ones, too. Near him were the singers: receiving, with professional indifference, the compliments of the company, and applying themselves, in turn, to a dozen proffered glasses of spirits and water, tendered by their more boisterous admirers; whose countenances, expressive of almost every vice in almost every grade, irresistibly attracted the attention, by their very repulsiveness. Cunning, ferocity, and drunkenness in all its stages, were there, in their strongest aspects; and women: some with the last lingering tinge of their early freshness almost fading as you looked: others with every mark and stamp of their sex utterly beaten out, and presenting but one loathsome blank of profligacy and crime; some mere girls, others but young women, and none past the prime of life; formed the darkest and saddest portion of this dreary picture. (237)

The truth is there to be read upon these and other faces, but such reading requires the sharp eye of the landlord – or of the narrator.

Accurate reading of the testimony written on the face or in the expression requires sharpness and attention (unless it is so glaringly obvious that even a half-blind magistrate can decipher it), but it also

requires moral rectitude and disinterest. Oliver is lucky to meet with all of these, and of him it can be said that, literally, his face is his fortune.

‘Queer name!’ said the old gentleman. ‘What made you tell the magistrate your name was White?’

‘I never told him so, sir,’ returned Oliver in amazement.

This sounded so like a falsehood, that the old gentleman looked somewhat sternly in Oliver’s face. It was impossible to doubt him; there was truth in every one of its thin and sharpened lineaments. (130)

Doubt is *impossible*, and what is read in Oliver’s face are not facts, but *truth*. (Later on in the novel, Oliver’s ‘earnest face’ convinces Harry Maylie and Mr Losberne that he has seen Fagin [313].)

Oliver is thus used to present a clearly ideological argument: the concealments and corruptions of a modern society, in which people are forced to deal with those they do not know, can be resolved though the use of those skills of interpersonal perception that serve to distinguish truth from falsity in a small community. A corrupt individual such as Monks can hide *in* the city, but he cannot conceal his corruption *from* his face. In the course of Monks’s first meeting with both Mr and Mrs Bumble – when the revealing topic of conversation is that of the ability of women to keep secrets – Monks suddenly removed his hands from his face, and ‘showed, to the unspeakable discomposure of Mr Bumble, that it was much distorted, and discoloured’ (337). In the world of *Oliver Twist*, if you are shrewd and upright then you *can* tell a book by its cover. In the final courtroom scene of the novel, Fagin is condemned not so much by proffered evidence as by the collective gaze of those observing him.

Misreading is still possible, but only if those doing the looking project their own shortcomings on to what they see.

Men who look on nature, and their fellow-men, and cry that all is dark and gloomy, are in the right; but the sombre colours are reflections from their own jaundiced eyes and hearts. The real hues are delicate, and need a clearer vision. (307)

Thus when the doctor tells Rose that although he believes Oliver's story, he does not think that 'it is exactly the tale for a practised police-officer', she asks him why. "Because, my pretty cross-examiner," replied the doctor: "because, viewed with their eyes, there are many ugly points about it; he can only prove the parts that look ill, and none of those that look well", and after detailing the suspicious circumstances surrounding Oliver's account he asks Rose: 'Don't you see all this?'

'I see it, of course,' replied Rose, smiling at the doctor's impetuosity; 'but still I do not see anything in it, to criminate the poor child.'

'No,' replied the doctor; 'of course not! Bless the bright eyes of your sex! They never see, whether for good or bad, more than one side of any question; and that is, always, the one which first presents itself to them.'
(276-7)

The exchange works in two directions. On the one hand it repeats a conventional view of the lack of logic possessed by women, but on the other hand, of course, the reader knows that Rose is correct in what she 'sees' and that the police officers are not. Deciding to attempt to deceive the police, Mr Losberne declares that 'All I know is . . . that we must try and carry it off with a bold face' (277). In a world of bold faces, one might assume that truths are not unproblematically to be read by the observer, but so far as Oliver is concerned it seems that Dickens believes that innocence has the power to distinguish itself from the 'bold face' of an assumed appearance.

Reciprocity and the look

The girl [Nancy] drew closer to the table, and glancing at Monks with an air of careless levity, withdrew her eyes; but as he turned his towards Fagin, she stole another look, so keen and searching, and full of purpose, that if there had been any bystander to observe the change, he could hardly have believed the two looks to have proceeded from the same person. (354)

Human interpersonal looking is naturally reciprocal. We *exchange* looks. Even when we avert our eyes, we signal something to an interlocutor or observer. In person-to-person communication we *interact*. We both receive and transmit information non-verbally in a cumulative process of reciprocal exchange. Human beings often want to gather information without paying the reciprocal price of providing information about themselves to others— including the information that they want to gather information. The numerous acts of looking that take place in *Oliver Twist* fall naturally into two categories: the reciprocal and the one-way. There are those that are genuinely interactive and there are those that – like the look of the voyeur or the spy – resist and evade reciprocity. As we will see, reciprocity is associated with the honest, the natural, and the true, while the one-way is at least initially associated with the unnatural, the perverted and the false. But this picture is far from being absolutely consistent, and as the novel proceeds the right to engage in one-way looking is progressively transferred from the bad to the good.

Reciprocity in looking may be natural but it is not necessarily pleasant, as the early example of Mr and Mrs Sowerberry illustrates.

Mr and Mrs Sowerberry – the shop being shut up – were taking their supper in the little back-parlour, when Mr Sowerberry, after several deferential glances at his wife, said,

'My dear – ' He was going to say more; but, Mrs Sowerberry looking up, with a peculiarly unpropitious aspect, he stopped short.

'Well,' said Mrs Sowerberry, sharply.

'Nothing, my dear, nothing,' said Mr Sowerberry.

'Ugh, you brute!' said Mrs Sowerberry. (78)

The unsophisticated pun by which their marital name is constituted tells the whole story, the fruits of this marriage are indeed far from sweet. Sweetness is not to be found, either, in the relationship between Fagin and Sikes, but there is a reciprocity of evil in their looks nevertheless.

'Hear me speak a word,' rejoined Fagin, laying his hand upon the lock. 'You won't be –'

'Well,' replied the other.

'You won't be – too – violent, Bill?'

The day was breaking, and there was light enough for the men to see each other's faces. They exchanged one brief glance; there was a fire in the eyes of both, which could not be mistaken.

'I mean,' said Fagin, showing that he felt all disguise was now useless, 'not too violent for safety. Be crafty, Bill, and not too bold.' (421)

In both of these cases, looks speak more fully and eloquently than do words, and it is for this reason that, on a number of occasions in the novel, eyes are averted. But such averting of the eyes is also communicative: in a situation of interpersonal communication it is indeed impossible not to communicate.

'Yes. I have come from Bill,' replied the girl. 'You are to go with me.'

'What for?' asked Oliver, recoiling.

'What for?' echoed the girl, raising her eyes, and averting them again, the moment they encountered the boy's face. 'Oh! for no harm.'

'I don't believe it,' said Oliver; who had watched her closely.

'Have it your own way,' rejoined the girl, affecting to laugh. 'For no good, then.' (198)

Once again, Nancy's eyes speak more truthfully than do her words. There is indeed a sort of moral double-take in this passage: although Nancy lies to the boy, the fact that she has to avert her gaze bears witness to the fact that she cannot lie with her eyes, and this inability betokens an inner honesty beneath her corrupt exterior (of which her words at this stage form a part). Oliver, we may note, is here no innocent abroad: he watches Nancy closely, and he knows what her avoidance of eye contact betokens. His skills are shared by Mr Brownlow, and seem generally to serve as a badge of moral goodness.

This circumstance, at least, you know already.'

'Not I,' said Monks, turning away his eyes and beating his foot upon the ground, as a man who is determined to deny everything. 'Not I.'

'Your manner, no less than your actions, assures me that you have never forgotten it, or ceased to think of it with bitterness,' returned Mr Brownlow. (436)

Even the underworld characters display gradations of moral corruption in their ability or inability to maintain eye contact; after the murder of Nancy, when Sikes visits Fagin's den, '[i]f an eye were furtively raised and met his, it was instantly averted' (447). Finally even Sikes, facing Charley's horror-struck gaze, is stared down: '[t]he man stopped half-way, and they looked at each other; but Sikes's eyes sunk gradually to the ground' (448).

At the same time, one of the advantages of communicating by means of looks rather than by words is that looks can be used to exclude as well as to inform.

Bill Sikes merely pointed to the empty measure. The Jew, perfectly understanding the hint, retired to fill it, previously exchanging a remarkable look with Fagin, who raised his eyes for an instant, as if in expectation of it, and shook his head in reply; so slightly that the action would have been almost imperceptible to an observant third person. It was lost upon Sikes, who was stooping at the moment to tie the boot-lace which the dog had torn. Possibly, if he had observed the brief interchange of signals, he might have thought that it boded no good to him.

'Is anybody here, Barney?' inquired Fagin; speaking, now that Sikes was looking on, without raising his eyes from the ground.

...

Now, whether a peculiar contraction of the Jew's red eyebrows, and a half-closing of his deeply-set eyes, warned Miss Nancy that she was disposed to be too communicative, is not a matter of much importance. The fact is all we need care for here; and the fact is, that she suddenly checked herself, and with several gracious smiles upon Mr Sikes, turned the conversation to other matters. In about ten minutes' time, Mr Fagin was seized with a fit of coughing; upon which Nancy pulled her shawl over her shoulders, and declared it was time to go. (155-6)

Fagin's ability to target his looks and to shield any tell-tale elements in his eyes from those he wants to exclude from a circle of knowledge bears testimony to his skill in restricting communicative reciprocity. But it is a skill that in the dog-eat-dog underworld of the novel can also be used against him.

Given the natural reciprocity of eye-contact, a look can both offer and canvass emotional succour and recognition of a shared humanity. The doomed child Dick tells Oliver that he dreams 'so much of Heaven, and Angels, and kind faces that I never see when I am awake' (96-7). It is because of her wish to escape or be spared the mute appeal posed by Oliver that Nancy wishes him away from her.

'The child,' said the girl, suddenly looking up, 'is better where he is, than among us; and if no harm comes to Bill from it, I hope he lies dead in the ditch, and that his young bones may rot there.'

'What!' cried the Jew, in amazement.

'Ay, I do,' returned the girl, meeting his gaze. 'I shall be glad to have him away from my eyes, and to know that the worst is over. I can't bear to have him about me. The sight of him turns me against myself, and all of you.' (239-40)

Nancy can meet Fagin's gaze, but she wishes Oliver away from her eyes. She is able morally to confront the eyes of Fagin, but not those of the innocent and abused child.

However it is Nancy's own eyes which pose the most powerful moral challenge in the novel. Sikes himself has to deny himself the sight of his own act of murder: Dickens's narrative presents us with a 'ghastly figure': '[t]he murderer staggering backward to the wall, and shutting out the sight with his hand, seized a heavy club and struck her down' (423). But that which he wishes to shield himself from pursues him: after her death, in one of Dickens's most powerful extended sequences, he cannot escape from Nancy's accusing eyes, just as, after the murder, even Sikes's dog can read his own threatened fate in Sikes's eyes. The last words uttered by Sikes are, 'The eyes again!' (453). There is no clearer demonstration of Dickens's reliance upon the look as active guarantor of knowledge and of justice.

Even the look of defiance or aggression enters into reciprocal exchange.

‘... Mrs Bumble, ma’am.’

‘Well,’ cried the lady.

‘Have the goodness to look at me,’ said Mr Bumble, fixing his eyes upon her. (‘If she stands such a eye as that,’ said Mr Bumble to himself, ‘she can stand anything. It is a eye I never knew to fail with paupers, and if it fails with her my power is gone.’)

Whether an exceedingly small expansion of eye be sufficient to quell paupers, who, being lightly fed, are in no very high condition; or whether the late Mrs Corney was particularly proof against eagle glances; are matters of opinion. The matter of fact is, that the matron was in no way overpowered by Mr Bumble’s scowl, but, on the contrary, treated it with great disdain, and even raised a laugh thereat, which sounded as though it were genuine.

On hearing this most unexpected sound, Mr Bumble looked, first incredulous, and afterwards amazed. He then relapsed into his former state; nor did he rouse himself until his attention was again awakened by the voice of his partner. (323-24)

The genuine reciprocity of this exchange is in marked contrast to the assumed reciprocity of the contrived *oeillades* involved in Mr and Mrs Bumble’s earlier courtship manoeuvrings.

Who owns the look of power?

Acts of one-way looking within the story of *Oliver Twist* fall into two dominant categories: the look of lust or voyeurism, and the look of the spy or of surveillance. Both of these forms of looking are more interested in possession and power than in interaction, both treat the person or persons surveyed as object for use rather than as human being to be respected. But, as the novel progresses, ownership of the one-way look of power is progressively transferred from the morally corrupt and the criminal to

characters who are both 'good' and associated with official power – with the police or the judiciary.

The clearest example of the gaze of lust or voyeurism is that directed by Fagin at young Oliver. The rather obvious suggestiveness of Dickens's insistence on calling (only) Charley Bates 'Master' is one of a number of hints associating the boys with tabooed forms of sexuality. After his recapture by Fagin's gang, Oliver is given a warning by 'that gentleman' that he will be given up to be hanged unless he cooperates. Oliver is particularly struck at this point by Fagin's scrutiny of him.

As he glanced timidly up, and met the Jew's searching look, he felt that his pale face and trembling limbs were neither unnoticed nor unrelished by that wary old gentleman.

The Jew, smiling hideously, patted Oliver on the head, and said, that if he kept himself quiet, and applied himself to business, he saw they would be very good friends yet. (178)

The statement that Fagin 'relishes' Oliver's 'trembling limbs' has an inescapably sexual set of connotations. When Noah Claypole is fed oysters by Charlotte, he takes them with 'intense relish', and this scene plays heavily on both the aphrodisiacal properties of oysters as well as on the popular association between the oyster and the female genitals. As with Fagin's lustful gaze at Oliver, this earlier scene also associates sexuality with looking: Charlotte tells Noah that, 'I like to see you eat 'em, Noah dear, better than eating 'em myself, something that Noah finds 'queer' (251). At any rate, Fagin's 'relishing' of Oliver's pale face and trembling limbs, and his promise that Oliver and he will, if Oliver behaves, become 'very good friends', attach a clearly voyeuristic and lustful character to his scrutiny of Oliver. Later on in the novel, Bill Sikes poses a revealing question.

'And wot,' said Sikes, scowling fiercely on his agreeable friend, 'wot makes you take so much pains about one chalk-faced kid, when you know there are fifty boys

snoozing about Common Garden every night, as you might pick and choose from?’

‘Because they’re of no use to me, my dear,’ replied the Jew, with some confusion, ‘not worth the taking. Their looks convict ’em when they get into trouble, and I lose ’em all. (192)

The answer is not wholly implausible, but the fact that Fagin’s answer is delivered ‘with some confusion’, along with his familiar use of the term ‘my dear’ to a man, provide a clear indication that there is more to the matter than he admits.

In itself this characterization of the look of lust as objectifying, demeaning, and non-reciprocal is unremarkable. But the two characters primarily responsible for such forms of looking – Fagin and Noah Claypole – are also the two characters who are most associated with spying: the most important form of non-reciprocal looking in the novel. *Oliver Twist* is a work riddled with the activities of spying and surveillance at the story level; it even includes a story about an ‘active officer’ named Jem Spyers. Fagin, moreover, represents a classic example of Foucault’s power-knowledge with its attendant machinery of clandestine information-gathering. (The potentiality for a punning double-meaning in the repeated references to his ‘pupils’ smoulders throughout the novel, as the boys do indeed serve as his eyes.) The Cripples public house provides a striking example in miniature of a Benthamite panopticon – except that we can presume that the subjects of the controlling gaze are generally unaware that they are being watched. When ‘Morris Bolter’ (Noah Claypole as was) and his ‘wife’ (Charlotte) enter the public house they are shown into a back room.

Now, this back-room was immediately behind the bar, and some steps lower, so that any person connected with the house, undrawing a small curtain which concealed a single pane of glass fixed in the wall of the last-named apartment, about five feet from its flooring, could not only look down upon any guests in the back-

room without any great hazard of being observed (the glass being in a dark angle of the wall, between which and a large upright beam the observer had to thrust himself), but could, by applying his ear to the partition, ascertain with tolerable distinctness, their subject of conversation. The landlord of the house had not withdrawn his eye from this place of espial for five minutes, and Barney had only just returned from making the communication above related, when Fagin, in the course of his evening's business, came into the bar to inquire after some of his young pupils. (380)

There is a loving quality to Dickens's detailing of the physical detail of this secret observation point, one that solicits the reader's own excitement in being made a party to the observations that it renders possible. This drawing of the reader into the act of surveillance constitutes a significant move in the progressive legitimization of surveillance, even though at this point the reader shares his or her secret view with characters such as the landlord and Fagin. The point is not so much who is doing the spying in the world of the novel, but more that the reader finds the shared experience pleasurable.

We are also provided with a very detailed description of the vantage point from which Claypole's spying is conducted, one which is almost as lovingly detailed as is the 'place of espial' in the public house.

These stairs are a part of the bridge; they consist of three flights. Just below the end of the second, going down, the stone wall on the left terminates in an ornamental pilaster facing towards the Thames. At this point the lower steps widen: so that a person turning that angle of the wall, is necessarily unseen by any others on the stairs who chance to be above him, if only a step. The countryman looked hastily round, when he reached this point; and as there seemed no better place of concealment, and, the tide being out, there was plenty of room, he slipped aside, with his back to the pilaster,

and there waited: pretty certain that they would come no lower, and that even if he could not hear what was said, he could follow them again, with safety. (408)

The use of the present tense at the start of this passage marks a further move in the involvement of the reader in surveillance activities, and it also enacts a largely unremarked shift from inside to outside of the diegesis: these stairs *are* part of the bridge and they *consist* of three flights – not just in the imaginative world of the novel but in the world of Dickens's contemporary readers. Here the author underwrites his realist imperative by sliding almost imperceptibly into non-fictional description: even the present-day reader assumes, on his or her encounter with this passage, that there really was a London bridge which really did have these characteristics. (The description of the secret vantage point in the public house, in contrast, is given in the standard narrative past tense.)

We are being moved, in other words, in the direction of the extra-fictional world in this passage, just as Noah Claypole is being moved slowly and surely in the direction of incorporation into the legal machine. By the end of the novel he has become an Informer, reporting publicans whom he has lured into dispensing brandy during church time. As Mr Brownlow's private surveillance of Monks reaches a natural conclusion, the formal machinery of law and order appropriates Noah Claypole to its own uses. Surveillance, which for most of the novel has appeared to be the prerogative of the criminal classes, is ultimately incorporated into the shady outer suburbs of authority – and we the readers have in turn been incorporated into these same acts of surveillance. We are thus positioned to accept the surveillance of the state as something in which we participate.

Another clear way in which Dickens integrates the illicit surveillance activities with the forces of established authority is, appropriately, in the final trial scene. Here Fagin the watcher becomes Fagin the watched, the objectifier objectified.

The court was paved, from floor to roof, with human faces. Inquisitive and eager eyes peered from every inch of space. From the rail before the dock, away into the sharpest angle of the smallest corner in the galleries, all looks were fixed upon one man – the Jew. Before him and behind: above, below, on the right and on the left: he seemed to stand surrounded by a firmament, all bright with gleaming eyes. (466)

Sikes has been pursued by imagined eyes – and has succeeded in hanging himself and sparing the judicial system the effort – while Fagin is surrounded by actual eyes: he is reduced to an object of vision, unable in any real way to interact with those who look at him or to reciprocate their gaze.⁶ And these eyes are all looking at – at what we, too, are observing.

The panoptical narrative

The prospect of interpersonal visual interaction with Fagin in the condemned cell is too terrible for a single warder: '[Fagin] grew so terrible, at last, in all the tortures of his evil conscience, that one man could not bear to sit there, eyeing him alone; and so the two kept watch together' (470). But the sight of the conscience-racked Fagin is certainly not deemed too terrible for the reader to contemplate, indeed there is a palpably sadistic indulgence in Dickens's prolonged description of Fagin's suffering that calls to mind Fagin's earlier sadistic relishing of Oliver's trembling limbs. Too terrible for a warder to contemplate, Fagin's exposure to the objectifying gaze of the crowd – and the reader – is stretched out over eight pages in a chapter with a title that clearly evokes the genre of the sensational prison account or confession:

⁶ It is well-known that Dickens used accounts of Jonathan Wild's career in constructing the character of Fagin. Lucy Moore quotes interestingly from *Mist's Weekly Journal* of 29 May 1725, describing the vast crowds that turned out to witness Wild's execution: 'In all that innumerable crowd, there was not one pitying eye to be seen, nor one compassionate word to be heard; but on the contrary, wherever he came, there was nothing but hollowing and huzzas, as if it had been on a triumph'. See Lucy Moore, *The Thieves' Opera: The Remarkable Lives and Deaths of Jonathan Wild, Thief-Taker, and Jack Shepherd, House-Breaker*. London: Viking, 1997, p. 254.

'Fagin's Last Night alive'. The whole chapter invites surrender to the sadistic gaze, and to indulgence in that spirit of the lynch mob that is condemned when Oliver is chased by the crowd after Mr Brownlow's pocket is picked.

I have suggested that at the heart of *Oliver Twist* there is a paradox. On the one hand, the reader is presented with an ideologically directed belief in the power of the eye to both perceive and display the truth, a belief that skills of interpersonal perception and acuity are sufficient to pierce and subdue the concealed crimes and secrets of a burgeoning industrial society and its urban conglomerations. But at the same time the novel progressively underwrites the judicial appropriation of techniques of surveillance that would not be necessary were it the case that truth and villainy are displayed for the honest citizen to read off the faces of the good and the bad.

It is also the case that the narrative techniques and perspectives of the novel contribute to this legitimation of judicial surveillance by inviting participation in forms of seeing which are non-reciprocal and which mimic the activities of the voyeur and the spy. Fagin has relished the powerlessness and fear of Oliver: we are invited to relish the powerlessness and fear of Fagin. Fagin uses spies: Mr Brownlow has subjected Monks to comparable forms of surveillance the results of which are offered to the reader to enjoy along with Monks's discomfiture. Fagin peers through a concealed window at those who are unaware that they are being watched and overheard – just as the reader sees and overhears Dickens's characters at their most private moments and when they are presented as believing themselves to be alone and unobserved.

The house to which Oliver had been conveyed, was in the neighbourhood of Whitechapel. The Jew stopped for an instant at the corner of the street; and, glancing suspiciously round, crossed the road, and struck off in the direction of Spitalfields.

The mud lay thick upon the stones, and a black mist hung over the streets; the rain fell sluggishly down, and

everything felt cold and clammy to the touch. It seemed just the night when it befitted such a being as the Jew to be abroad. As he glided stealthily along, creeping beneath the shelter of the walls and doorways, the hideous old man seemed like some loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved: crawling forth, by night, in search of some rich offal for a meal. (186)

Seemed to whom? The passage is a disturbing one for a number of reasons. For a modern reader it strikes immediate chords with anti-semitic Nazi films in which cuts between shots from Jewish ghettos and shots of swarming rats make a similar identification as is made between 'the Jew' and 'some loathsome reptile' in the quoted passage. The phrase 'such a being as the Jew' has a generalizing effect and seems to grope towards 'such a being as a Jew'. Reading this passage myself I am very conscious of being positioned in a 'looking-down' relation to Fagin; Genette's and Cohn's objections notwithstanding I find the concept of omniscience unavoidable here. And the omniscience of the narrative focus appears to go along with a sense of physical elevation. I am not sure quite why this is – perhaps because we assume that reptiles are low on the ground so that to picture Fagin as reptile is suggest that we are looking down upon him from a height.

At the same time, a phrase such as 'everything felt cold and clammy to the touch' implies physical presence, for we do not, surely, assume that it is Fagin's sense of the cold and clammy that is being evoked: he is at one with his surroundings, whereas 'we', as readers, have a reaction to the cold and clammy atmosphere and objects because we, along with the narrator, are *not* at one with them. The passage thus positions the reader in a dry, clean, warm, superior position, looking down on, and reacting with horror to, the wet, clammy, cold and loathsome.⁷

⁷ Susan R. Horton includes this passage among a number of others from a range of Dickens's works, in all of which words such as 'seems' or 'appears' are used to indicate an exact match between how the observer interprets something, and what is actually the case. Regarding the passage in question, Horton comments, 'again what seems to be is what feels true to the spirit'

We are now in a position to outline an 'economy of the gaze' in *Oliver Twist*.

1. Good and evil are displayed on the face and are impossible to conceal.
2. Good people can be divided into two categories:

The innocent good, especially pure women and children, whose main function is to be seen rather than to see; although they can perceive wickedness and good, they can also be deceived.

The wise good, normally men, or women like Nancy who have lost their innocence, whose active gaze searches out and punishes wickedness, who are hard to deceive, and who generally see rather than are seen.

3. The wicked do all in their power to avoid being observed, especially by the wise good. The eyes of others are recognized as a principal danger by all the evil characters, who seek to avoid them. As a result, the forces of good need a machinery of surveillance.
4. Moral rectitude is associated with being the subject rather than the object of the look, especially at the end of the novel when the spies are incorporated into the legal system and villains such as Sikes and Fagin become the objects of a moral-judicial avenging gaze. The plot and its resolution in the novel consist of a gradual transference of the active gaze from the wicked to the good, and a gradual passivization and visual objectification of the wicked. This process allows the reader to share the narrator's voyeurism and scopophilia with a clear conscience, and to feel part of – incorporated in – the machinery of judicial surveillance outlined in the novel.

(see Susan R. Horton, *The Reader in the Dickens World*, London: Macmillan Press. 1981, p. 51). But as I have argued, the question is: seems *to whom*? As no other character is present, it can only be to the narrator, who, as Cohn reminds us, knows as much about Fagin as the author (who has created them both) decides. The passage clearly appeals to pre-existing prejudices in *readers*: men like Fagin (or, worse, Jews) are as bad as they look.

John Brenkman has recently argued that a 'paradox inherent in novel writing' is that '[t]here is no novel without omniscience, yet every omniscience is limited; therefore, there is no omniscience'⁸. Well, one can see what he means, of course, but there is a sense in which recent dissatisfactions with terms such as 'omniscient narrator' can, if we are not careful, obscure an important set of distinctions. What a narrator knows about his or her characters, and even more what a reader knows about them *and how this knowledge is obtained*, together constitute a vital element in the chain that links 'what characters know' at one end with 'what ideological position the work as a whole reflects and underwrites' at the other. If we are unhappy with the phrase 'what a narrator knows' then we may replace it with something such as 'what a narrative allows the reader to know and what it hides from him or her'. But the example of *Oliver Twist* demonstrates the important links between a number of levels of both metaphorical and literal looking that can be found in a novel. These include: (i) what characters see and how they look; (ii) what the narrator sees and how he or she 'looks'; (iii) what the reader sees and what acts of looking he or she is encouraged to identify with and partake in; and, finally, (iv) what forms of looking and surveillance a culture sanctions, and what forms it proscribes.

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⁸ John Brenkman, 'On Voice'. *Novel: A Forum for Fiction* 33(3), Summer 2000, 281–306, p. 288.