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Deconstructing postcolonial scopic regimes: The subversion of power imaginaries in the novels of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Sony Labou Tansi

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This paper examines the relationship between visibility, knowledge and power in the postcolonial African novel. With examples from selected texts of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Sony Labou Tansi, it argues that visual culture, usually employed in the analysis of cultural images and material iconographies in media studies, can aptly be employed in textual analysis given that postcolonial novels are primarily engaged with the undoing of dominant visual regimes. Against the background of hegemonic regimes based on instrumentalist and subjectifying surveillance of the subject, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Labou Tansi build their texts on visual tactics and practices that subvert the capacity of the state apparatus to see, hence to know the subject. Bordering on humour, parody, graffiti, bricolage and surrealist representation, the two authors "play" with the state Panopticon, creating avenues for countervailing meanings that elude the dominant regimes of vision, knowledge and power. The subversive visual practices are inscribed within a conception of literary textualities that is based on plurivocality, heteroglossia, dialogism and the non-transparent text. Through the deconstruction of dominant visual architecture, both authors open up spaces for democratic conception of power that takes account of inter-subjectivity and non-hegemonic participation in the postcolonial public sphere.

Key words: Postcolony, visual culture, visibility, subversion, dictatorship.

INTRODUCTION

Visual culture is a well-established approach to arts and cultural studies. It examines the intricacies and implications of visibility in media identities, popular culture, virtual perceptions, socio-political iconography etc. It places emphasis on the power to see/show as a crucial aspect in analyzing a wide variety of socio-cultural productions ranging from social media images to private and public spaces iconography. However, this approach has hardly ever found solid expression in literary analysis

of written texts in spite of the preponderance of "regimes of seeing" as determinant leitmotifs in a number of classic creative texts dealing with dictatorial power. Prominent amongst them is George Orwell's futuristic novel *1984* that portrays Big Brother surveillance, a characteristic of modern hegemonic state system, especially during the Cold War period. In a strictly postcolonial African context, Marechera's (1980) photographic novel, *Black Sunlight*, offers another outstanding example of the visual novel

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wherein a photojournalist captures events under a totalitarian African government through his photographic lenses. Such visual novels invite us to think beyond the traditional “point of view” analysis that is recurrent in narratological approaches to literature, instigating an intermedial overture for the proper understanding of literary depictions of hegemonic formations on the one hand and creative tactics of transformative interpolation of master perspectives/narratives on the other. This article attempts to bring the approach of visual culture to bear on the analysis of the written text, examining the power dynamics involved in the mechanics of seeing and its relationship to power constellations. Firstly, the primacy of visuality in the imperialist dimension of the Enlightenment project is discussed. Secondly, this form of visuality in the conception of dictatorial state power and their deconstruction in dictatorship novels is established by Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Sony Labou Tansi.

Vision and visuality constitute important dimensions of postcolonial tactics and strategies of social formations. Like its counterparts in other parts of the world, postcolonial dictatorial regimes rely on their surveillance machinery over their subjects, leading to what Allen Feldman refers to as “scopic regimes”. Feldman (2007, 429) defines scopic regimes as “the regimes that prescribe or render untenable other modes and objects of perception. A scopic regime is an ensemble of practices and discourses that establish truth; claims, typicality, and credibility of visual acts and objects and politically correct modes of seeing”. However, postcolonial writers gaze back at scopic regimes, unpacking and disentangling their complex hegemonic strategies. It is further argued that the “seeing back” tactics of postcolonial novels do not only target the postcolonial visual regimes, rather they participate in a wider and deeper enterprise of deconstructing hegemonic culture and Cartesian rationality encapsulated in the postcolonial state system.

IMPERIAL SCOPIC REGIMES: THE POWER OF SEEING IN IMPERIAL DISPENSATIONS

To see is one of the most essential functions of human senses. In an analysis of the primacy of sight/vision in our claim to knowledge in everyday practices, Thomas Seifrid posits that the pre-eminence of visuality in knowledge formation at the very basic level of human interaction, is evident in “our now thoroughly visual everyday vocabulary (including casually deployed words and phrases like evidence, insight, shed light on, obvious, appears, brilliant) to the rampant videoism of popular culture” (1998, 438). Right at the beginning of his *Treatise on Metaphysics*, the Greek philosopher Aristotle stresses the primordially of seeing as the strongest and determinant sense with which humans are endowed. In his view, seeing prevails over other senses in determining our claim to knowledge: “above all others the sense of sight.

For not only with a view to taking action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things” (350 BC, 1). Exploring the contiguity between seeing and knowing, Bill Ashcroft takes us back to ancient Greece and its defining contribution to Western (and now “globalized”) philosophical regimes, asserting that:

The linking of knowledge, reason and sight attended the birth of philosophy and prompted a wide range of social and cultural practices, from the emphasis on optics to the idealization of the nude body. The verb to know in classical Greek is the perfect form of the verb *eido* I see and both are related to the Latin *video* - I see (2001, 126).

Thus, seeing has become coterminous and metonymic with knowing, and the former being the ultimate form of testimony in Western culture; a cultural prism that has imposed itself on other cultures some of which are otherwise based on the primacy of other human senses like touch or hearing for example, in Hebraic and but also in some African societies.

The visual cultural critic and Frankfurt School historian, Martin Jay, has equally analyzed the power of vision/visuality as a determinant in Western cultural self-writing and perspectives on the visualizable and transparent “other” in connection with the entire network of imperial governmentality. The metanarrative of Western progress is based on the pre-eminence of Western perspective, the ability to know the “other” and to integrate him into the colonial project. This explains why within Western culture itself, deconstructive discourses have often taken account of the prerogatives of seeing and its mechanics of control. In relation to Foucault’s analysis of surveillance concerning the Panopticon, Richard Rorty’s mirror of nature and Guy Debord’s society of the spectacle, Martin Jay asserts that “we confront again and again the ubiquity of vision as the master sense of the modern era” (2003, 3). Western visuality has constructed a complex epistemology of power and knowledge that cannot only be deconstructed through a return of the gaze but also by problematizing the mechanics of visuality and contesting the objectification and instrumentalisation of the other for the self.

The act of seeing is a pre-requisite, a premise for an instrumental re-definition of the seen by the seer. Seeing is accompanied by an epistemological appropriation or, in extreme cases, physical elimination. Martin Jay underlines the curious connection between the act of seeing and the implicit violence that it presupposes. To see, in a context of power always proceeds to the act of mastering, possessing, limiting, re-fashioning, and if possible, elimination. Martin Jay posits that in an essentially ocularcentric world, represented by the camera as the framing mechanism, there may be a kind

of distanced violence in the penetrating stare or withering gaze that is more than a metaphorical analogue of its more proximate tactile counterpart. The underlying aggression in the photographers "shot" has also not gone unnoticed (2003, 2).

To capture another individual/object within one's visual purview always goes with certain assumptions of power. The violence of overbearing perspective has characterised the Western "I-Eye" and its cultural relationship of domination over and relationship with other cultures of the world. This privileged perspective, the basis of Cartesian logocentrism characteristic of European Enlightenment, has not been dissociated from the power of naming, possessing through nomenclature that which one perceives as objective and immutable.

Given its perceived difference with painting, an art born out of the artists' imagination, photography purports to capture things as they are in reality. This statement is not to deny the mimetic nature of painting but to stress the mechanic intentionality of the photograph to depict reality as "it is." Thus, it presents itself as the enhancement of the natural eye, as the "instrument of evidence" which is at once undeniable and irrevocable. In his analysis of the power implications of photography, Allen Feldman establishes the contiguity between the acts of seeing and killing in some contexts. He insinuates that:

Seeing and killing, being seen and being killed are entangled and exchangeable in the ecology of fear and anxiety. Further, visual appropriation, because it is always pregnant with the potential for violence, has become a metonym for dominance over others: power lies in the totalizing engorged gaze over the politically prone body, and subjugation is encoded as exposure to this penetration (Coronil and Skurkis, 2006: 428).

The metaphorical connection between photography and "rape" as symbols of domination is emphasized by Susan Sontag in her pioneering text *On Photography* (1977). Sontag underlines the intrusive dimension of photography and the prerogative of the visual gaze. However, where Sontag clearly brings out the instrumentality of the camera in "capturing" and "shooting" the other is in relation to the ruthless expansion of America's white population into the Wild West (1977, 50). She purports that the camera played a curiously similar role as the gun in the ruthless expansion into the Wild West. The choreographed pose of the Indian was meant to perform his backwardness and to act as the exotic other of the immigrant American. The photographs taken of the Indian under circumstances induced by the photographer, later became an archive that generated authoritative (though biased discourses), on his culture over which he had virtually no control. The Western colonizer perceived the native other as a spectacle to be exhibited in order to prove the natives' inherent need or inarticulate request for intervention in the name of civilization and modernization. Throughout colonial history, these two processes have been pretexts for

capitalist accumulation and its resultant violence on the colonized. To photograph and exhibit the native was thus a means of making evident the insufficiency of the natives' body, culture, worldview and inferiority in comparison to the Western Self. In other words, the other entered the archive and conscience of the Western world through the mechanics of instrumentalised seeing.

Orientalism also embedded a very violent imagistic dimension. Portraying the Orient in Orientalist/colonialist exotic photography was as important as speaking or writing about it. In his text *Bodyscape*, Nicholas Mirzoeff stresses the importance of photography in attempts to visualize the bodies of the Oriental others. The natives' body was perceived as physiognomy gone wrong, corresponding to the realm of unreformed nature as an antithesis of the perfect Western body. In underlying the photographic dimension of racialist ideology, Mirzoeff asserts that:

Race thus could not exist without a visual taxonomy of racial difference. In order to provide and classify such difference, entire archives of visual material came to exist in nineteenth and twentieth-century museums, private collections and laboratories. One such archive is that constituted by the mass of photography produced by colonial travelers, scientists, and governments in the former colonies of Africa and Asia. These anthropological studies, postcards, views and scenes of native life were quickly designated an embarrassment in the era of decolonization, their previous popularity at once forgotten (1995, 124).

The traveller-cum photographer became the expert of the Orient given that his photographs and accounts shed light on aspects of the native social, political, religious and economic life. The practice of travel photography contributed to what could be referred to as scopic regimes given their appeal to Western viewers. More importantly, colonized subjects came to look at themselves through visual prisms constructed by Western eyes.

The process of decolonisation set in a gradual reconsideration of the gaze through practices of self-representation. However, it is argued that at the time of decolonization, the aesthetics of "seeing back" was deployed against two different but interrelated regimes of power. At once poised at the overruling colonialist visuality, it also developed at a time when political dictatorship became a major characteristic of postcolonial political reality. Within the tradition of postcolonial practices of subversion, the tactics of "seeing back" can be inscribed within what Bill Ashcroft defines as interpolation:

The capacity to interpose, to intervene, to interject a wide range of counter-discursive tactics into a dominant discourse without asserting a unified anti-imperialist

intention, or a spate of oppositional purity. Post-colonial subjects, in their ordinary dialogic engagement with the world, are not passive ciphers of discursive practices (Ashcroft, 2001, 47- 48).

In a slightly different way from the counter-discourse that focused on the empire writing back at the presumed centre, interpolation performs a dual role. It dismantles both the colonialist epistemology and the infrastructures of postcolonial dictatorial regimes which have re-utilized much of the epistemological apparatus of the colonial system. The postcolonial modes of “seeing back” therefore have to confront the totalizing visuality of imperial hegemony and postcolonial state ideological and repressive apparatus.

NGUGI WA THIONG'O/SONY LABOU TANSI: INTERCEPTING THE STATE PANOPTICON

Ngugi's burlesque novel *Wizard of the Crow* narrates the story of the gradual downfall of a Ruler, who wants to erase the memory of his subjects and blinker their vision of a future without him. The story is a dexterous mixture of fairy tale aesthetics and modernist novel. This “theatrical novel” represents the absurd megalomania of postcolonial leadership. One of the Ruler's most trusted acolytes is Markus Machokali, the Minister of foreign affairs. As if in a theatrical cast¹, the narrator presents the various key political actors of the Republic of Aburiria in the opening pages of the novel. On the subject of Machokali, he reveals that,

one day he flew to England, where under the glare of publicity he entered a major London hospital not because he was ill but because he wanted to have his eyes enlarged, to make them ferociously sharp...so that they would be able to spot the enemies of the ruler no matter how far their hiding place. Enlarged to the size of electric bulbs, his eyes were now the most prominent feature of his face, dwarfing his nose, cheeks, and forehead (*Wizard*, 13).

Machokali stands as the eye of the government, a terribly insecure regime that dreads the resistance of the citizens that it has continuously muzzled for decades. Machokali's talents and insights bring him into collision with other members of the Ruler's cabinets like the state security chief, Sikioku and Minister of Information, Benjamin Mambo. These figures enlarge their ears and lips respectively to be able to serve the Ruler more “efficiently”. The role of these ministers is three-fold. Since they serve the interests of the Ruler, they equally stand for the eyes, ears and mouth of the respective European countries where each of them performs his surgeries. This situation adds a neocolonial dimension to

the power networks wielded by the three government ministers given that when the Second Ruler falls ill, foreign states start proposing specific ministers as possible replacements. Thus, each minister becomes the eyes of a specific foreign country with regard to its interests in Aburiria. Last but not least, they use their enlarged organs to be able to spy on each other as every one of them seeks to enhance his narrow interest in the face of the ruler. Influence peddling amongst these three figures leads to visceral in-fighting that contributes to political instability and the eventual downfall of the kleptocratic regime.

In spite of the desire of the Ruler to exercise complete visuality on the territorial space in order to capture and coerce the subjects under public authority, the latter exploit zones of escape to maximize their chances of survival under the dictatorial regime. A perfect example of the subjects capacity to dismember the visual technology built around him by hegemonic forces is clearly brought out through the subplot that deals with Kamiti. Kamiti evolves from a wretched unemployed youth to one of the most coveted figures by the power circles of the Republic of Aburiria. He holds a Masters Degree from an Indian University but when he returns home, he cannot get a job, to his sheer disappointment and that of his parents. His desperate situation calls for a nimble sense of innovation. On one occasion, he disguises as a beggar and occupies, with other fellow “beggars”, the entrance to one of the most luxurious hotels in Eldares, the countrys capital. Unfortunately for them, the local police launch a clean-up operation to rid the public sphere of the scum of the city. One policeman, in a venal quest to seize Kamiti's begging bag full of coins, follows the latter into a nearby thicket. Dreading imminent capture, Kamiti improvises a signpost on which he inscribes “Wizard of the crow” and places it on the doorpost of an abandoned bush-house, warning against unauthorised entry into the “sacred” sanctuary. Gathere, the policeman, backtracks in fear, diffusing rumours about the supernatural powers of “Wizard of the crow”. Through Arigaigai's rumours, the incontestable divining powers of “Wizard of the crow” become a popular saga within the power cycles of Aburiria's capital city. Gradually, this space turns into a “secret and sacred public space”, with ambitious and high-ranking state officials visiting to consult the “seer” so that he can use his magical powers to enable them get promoted or appointed to higher posts in the Rulers government. Meanwhile, Nyawira, the female character that contests the Rulers regime, meets Kamiti. After they share their life stories, she joins the latter, and both become the male and female personae behind the improvised shrine.

The shrine of the Wizard of the Crow stands as a very creative trope in the text. Through this theatrical space, Ngugi engages in a discursive reversal of visuality as a key element in the dynamics of hegemonic power. Through the window of the shrine, Kamiti and Nyawira are able to monitor the government officials who come to

¹ In an earlier article, I analysed Ngugi's novel as a dramaturgical text for which the novelistic form has been used as a matter of convenience. See Shang, G. N. (2013) « Texte comme Prétexte: la transfiguration générique dans des romans de Sony Labou Tansi et de Ngugi wa Thiong'o. » *French Studies in Southern Africa*. Rev. 43.

them for “consultations” in expectation of ministerial appointments. When Sikiokuu, Minister of Internal Security, decides to visit the shrine to outdo his rivals in government, his characteristic self-assurance sinks once he enters the simulated space of the Wizard of the Crow:

There was the minister of security. The enlarged ears, the most conspicuous feature of his body. He is looking everywhere. Left. Right. Nyawira whispered to Kamiti: let us start. Kamiti nodded. He coughed provocatively, and the minister turned round in fear. Not knowing where the voice came from. You are in the presence of the Wizard of the Crow!! (*Wizard*, 476)

From the small hole of the shrine, Kamiti and Nyawira (the two faces behind “Wizard of the crow”) laugh mockingly at the trembling body of one of the most prominent ministers of State, Sikiokuu. Through the simulacra that characterize his novel, Ngugi reverses the gaze of the power tender, subjecting him to uncertainty and fear. Sikiokuu, the object of vision does not know when and how he is being observed, nor is he aware of the double articulation of the eyes and voices behind the smokescreen of “Wizard of the crow.” Nyawira and Kamiti peep through the hole of the shrine in turns, impersonating one voice to give the impression of only one person behind the show. We are therefore faced with an improvised and inverted Panopticon that traps the state in its penetrative visuality. When the state penetrates into the bush Ela (1990),² in its attempt to use the subject to foster its power, it exposes itself to the wiles and guile deployed by the latter to escape capture. At the end of the process of conquest, it is the state that is mastered thanks to what Achille Mbembe calls the historical ability of the postcolonial subject to *play with power authorities*³ (Mbembe and Indociles, 1988).

Contrary to the instrumentalisation of visuality by state power, Kamiti and Nyawira resort to mimicry and laughter. From this simulated private/public space, they access state information, revealing the shaky foundation of a state on the brink of implosion.

From a rather different dimension, the deconstruction of the state Panopticon is aptly expressed in Labou Tansi’s (1981) dictatorship novel, *L’Etat Honteux (The Shameful State)*. Through the use of parody and sarcasm, the codes that govern the myth of the founding father are inverted. In this text, Martillimi Lopez, a prototypical incarnation of patriarchal dictatorship, becomes a victim of his ostentatious exhibition of power when he dies. In

the manner of medieval Kings whose bodies were preserved to ensure a sempiternal memory (Bakhtin, 1984, 193), Lopez’s corpse is subjected to a parodic beatification process. The national museum, as a space for the exhibition of national cultural patrimony, is the ideal space for the caricaturing of the lost power of the defunct patriarch:

Lopez de Maman qui maintenant dort au musée de la Nation dans un cercueil de pierre, avec son œil droit qui na pas pu se fermer, mais laissons-le regarder la patrie pour des siècles et des siècles, qu’il veille sur nous dans son sommeil de père pourrissant, laissons le nous protéger des tyrans, ce regard de mort germera dans la mémoire des enfants de notre passé, Dieu est grand!! Cet œil mort qui regarde cest la nation en miniature.

Mama’s Lopez now sleeps in the national museum in a stone coffin, with his left eye unable to close, but let us allow him to look at the fatherland for centuries and centuries to come, let him watch over us in his sleep of a decaying father, let him protect us against tyrants, this gaze of the dead will germinate in the memories of the children of our history, God is great!! This dead eye that looks around is the nation in miniature (L’Etat, 23).

The posthumous treatment of the patriarchs body portrays an ambiguous co-fusion of both canonization and profanation that reflect the duality of Lopez’s hypocritical regime and parodies his aspirations to divinity and immortality. In his analysis of spaces in “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”, Foucault refers to museums as “heterotopias in which time does not cease to accumulate, perching, so to speak, on its own summit” (Foucault, 1997: 5). The exhibition of the president’s corpse in the museum parodies his abuse of culture and history in legitimizing his brutal state. With his eyes that are still open, he can still watch over the country even after his death. In the potentates surveillance system, the subject is both a child that needs to be protected (against himself) and a threatening “other” that needs to be kept under watch. These two epistemologies of the colonial subject resonate with the colonial archive on the native subject. The eye, symbol of his hitherto spatiotemporal Cyclopean vision, capable of intruding and mastering both the subject’s private and public spheres, remains open but emptied of its essence: that of sight and vision. It is turned into a Rabelaisian poached egg-shell (Bakhtin, 1984, 200), rendered by the vivid oxymoron – “*oeil mort qui regarde*”, the “dead eye that watches”. This passage therefore deconstructs and demystifies the power of Martillimi Lopez, who, despite his larger-than-life image, does not escape poetic justice in the hands of death. The image of the marble stone, a male material, has often stood for impenetrable authority and fortitude, for, according to Fanon, the world of the colonizer is hemmed behind stone and steel (1973, 36). His being embalmed in a marble coffin deconstructs his phallogocentric image for he is now powerless. The stony

² Jean-Marc Ela’s text *Quand l’Etat pénètre dans la brousse*, (1990) analyses the subversion of state power in the postcolonial peasant space and the strategies that the local folks mobilize in order to mitigate the hold of the state system on their lives and activities.

³ In *Afriques Indociles: Christianisme et Pouvoir en Afrique Postcoloniale*, Mbembe asserts that «*l’indigène recourt, comme à l’époque coloniale, à toutes les ressources de ce qu’il faut bien appeler sa capacité historique à l’indiscipline[...]Partout, la délinquance d’Etat a produit une culture de débrouillardise et de sauve-qui-peut et un déclin de l’identité citoyenne*» (The native resorts, like during the colonial period, to the possible resources of what one can call his historic capacity for indiscipline [...]. Everywhere, state delinquency has led to a culture of improvisation, of every-man-for-himself and a decline of civic identity) (1988, 148-149).

fortress bears a false appearance of strength and authority. The symbolic archiving of Martillimi Lopez's body can be interpreted as the ultimate act of subversion in the text. From being the omnipresent actor and the unmoved mover in the narrative, Lopez's body is now acted upon. The textual treatment of the dictators body conforms to Lydie Moudileno's view that "as soon as the tyrant is made into a character in the tale, he immediately loses the exclusiveness of authority by becoming the subject of an author who can now have him suffer the whims of his imagination" (Thomas, 2002, 58). Martillimi Lopez's body is made to occupy the public cultural space *differently*, not as the national hero but as a victim of his decadent authority.

Through interpolations of dominant visualities, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Sony Labou Tansi's novels epistemologically interrogate prevailing narrations and hegemonic understanding of nationhood and belonging. The dictatorial postcolonial regimes conceive of the nation as a unified and monologic formation at the service of unquestionable state Reason, ruling out any possibility of contending views and alternative visions. Conceiving of a homogenous nation is one of the primary grounds or bases for the one-party regimes and their mutations into pseudo-pluralistic political dispensation in a supposedly democratic and post-cold war era. In a critical interpretation of Walter Benjamin's corpus about anti-totalitarian discourse, Gerhard Richter foregrounds the sense of community and nationhood as based on *wechselseitige Fremdheit*, that is, "mutual alienness to reflect on how unspeakable any community these days... must be. This mutual strangeness is not a phantasmagoria of the coordinated masses, it is precisely the promise of any community to come" (2000, 99). This view is in total contrast to the totalistic and totalitarian visuality of hegemonic regimes à la Hitler that repose on the claim of *Gleichschaltung*, (enforced political conformity) of the masses (Richter, 2000, 216). The aestheticisation of politics and the political instrumentality of the visually transparent masses are thus inscribed within the larger-than-large telos of the charismatic leader. Richter defines German fascism as based on a certain epistemology of visuality:

Fascism was characterized by a rhetoric of presence; the delusions of subjective heroism; the questionable ability to show the masses their own face; the effacing differences (such as that between civilian and military populations), war-driven technophilia, rhetoric of eternity, effort of total co-ordination, myth-inspired irrationalism, false essence, immediacy, doctrine of single, stable meaning (2000, 79).

Thus, much effort was invested by the Nazi scopic regime to condition the visual possibilities of the masses. Totalistic and conclusive visuality is the ground on which the fascistic state claims to be the epitome of a popular spirit. Making recourse to the differences between the baroque and Enlightenment visualities, with regard to

Christine Buci-Glucksmann's *La raison baroque* and *La folie de voir*, Martin Jay affirms that:

Celebrating the dazzling, disorienting, ecstatic surplus of images in baroque visual experience, she emphasizes its rejection of the monocular geometricization of the Cartesian tradition, with its illusion of homogeneous three-dimensional space seen with a God's-eye-view from afar. She also tacitly contrasts the ... belief in legible surfaces and faith in the material solidity of the world its paintings map with the baroque fascination for opacity, unreadability, and the indecipherability of the reality it depicts (2003, 16-17).

Baroque visuality thus stresses the uncanny as characteristic of human visual experience, disputing the prerogative of a totalizing visuality and the all-knowing knowledge regimes that result from it. Baroque visuality performs kitsch on the totalistic visual premise of Cartesian epistemology, underlining gray areas of indeterminate meanings and zones of contradictions and unreadability. It can be compared to the aesthetics of the graffiti, a form of writing that leaves space for its revision as it is papered on pastiche, suture and temporariness. In other words, graffiti does to writing what baroque visuality does to scopic hegemonic regimes. In the same dimension, baroque visuality, characterized by laughter, perceives reality not as finality but as an entity in the state of becoming and (re)construction, favoring negotiation over arbitration.

The graffiti form of writing as the graphic transcription of non-totalistic visuality is characteristic of Tansi's (1988) novel *Les Yeux du Volcan* (The Eyes of the Volcano). Labou Tansi's aesthetics inflects and porches the lens of the scopic regime through graffiti inscription. In one passage of the novel, the narrator directs our gaze unto the inscription of the ruling party on the wall of an official building that underlines the power of the State/president as guardian of the Revolution to monitor any dissident subjects: «*les ennemis du peuple sont partout mais l'œil de la Révolution les connaît*» (the enemies of the people are everywhere, but the eye of the Revolution knows them) (*Yeux du Volcan*, 85). Once more, we are faced with the metonymy of the eye as an instrument for "knowing". However, an unidentified and unruly citizen intercepts the self-representation of the State and its panoptic surveillance, exposing its ineptitude: «*Un auteur de graffiti avait ajouté le mot «aveugle» au crayon de beauté, juste au-dessous du mot œil: «l'œil aveugle»...*» (A graffiti author had added the word "blind" with a beauty pencil, just under the word eye: "blind eye") (*Yeux du Volcan*, 87). The indocile subject subverts the pretense of the state to see, hence know everything. The title of the text, "the eye of the volcano" suggests the ability of natural laws to defy the will to power of the state forces. The volcano, a possible metaphor for cataclysmic change, continues to threaten the certainty and perpetuity of the dictatorial regime. A trait of the graffiti is that it hardly

produces an autonomous text, but rather maintains a parasitic and deconstructive co-existence with the master text. In the same dimension as the graffiti, Tansi's text is inertly haptic, heteroglossic, ambiguous, not canceling out the official language, but interpolating it and disrupting its discursive coherence.

Ngugi and Labou Tansi subvert dominant visuality, recreating aesthetics that permanently haunt spaces of hegemonic power. In *Wizard of the Crow*, the government posts posters of the civil rights leader Nyawira, promising compensation to every citizen who provides any conduit to her hideout. However, the protesting masses come out and declare to the police that they are all different faces of Nyawira, "the enemy of the state", making it difficult for the police to arrest the dissident leader. With the willingness of the masses to be detained as "Nyawiras", the state Panopticon⁴ is disempowered. The strength of Ngugi's novel in particular lies in the ability to turn the fundamental perversion of the governing regime into effective narrative tactics. In a regime where citizens are divested of individuality due to the objectifying practices of the ruling class and where the lexicon "people" is merely used as vacuous gap-filler in political discourse, Ngugi fashions a narrative aesthetic that fuses spaces and subjects, blurring traditional lines of division and distinctions. An example of spatial fusion is when the performing women and the putative audience end up participating in the chants that denounce the Ruler in front of foreign dignitaries who have come to assess the feasibility of the Marching to Heaven Project (*Wizard*, 250). This collapse of spatialities and subjectivities underlines the basic structure of the *gicaandi* performance whereby Ngugi's performer/ narrator Arigaigai and the audience both participate in the construction of the common folk story that makes up the novel *Wizard of the Crow*. Thus, in sync with the disruption of monologic visuality, the novel lends itself to plurivocality that enables it to claim a truly communal construction and transmission through gossips and rumours, constituting an ever indefinite, equivocal and dialogic medium of enunciation. The invasion of the public sphere with a multiplicity of narratives responds to and dismantles the monopolization of the social space by the discourse of the Ruler of the Republic of Aburiria.

The visual perception of the masses in postcolonial political imaginary is fundamentally based on their political utility. They are the faceless, anonymous agents

that come up to support upheavals and slide back into oblivion. They are the vote banks that are summoned before elections and who are more or less disregarded when the electoral process is over. In the expression of Graciela Montaldo in "Mass and Multitude: Bastardised Iconographies of the Modern Order", the masses, as they figure in political discourse of the governing class in the public sphere "are like flocks, they reproduce without control and the males are constantly sodomising each other; they have horribly ugly faces and they are sensual" (Montaldo, 2005: 235). With regard to such a lack of consideration for the genuine interests of the governed by the rulers, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2006), makes recourse to a de-individualizing aesthetics that is based on fusion of spaces, discourses and subjectivities.

In another dimension, Labou Tansi interpolates dominant visual apparatus through surrealist aesthetics. In spite of the propensity of president Lopez's security repressive apparatus to capture and execute rebel leaders in the most brutal fashion, his surveillance regime is far from perfect. Subversion to his authority comes from the most unlikely quarters. Through a surrealist double, the elusive avatar of Larsa Laura penetrates the palace of the president and constitutes a pernicious and supernatural source of subversion to his authority. For nine continuous months, Larsa Laura, through her double, violates the intimate space of the president, desecrating the presidential bed with faeces (*L'Etat*, 58, 87, 88). When Martillimi Lopez meets a kid in his parlour after witnessing his desecrated bed, he accuses him of being a surrogate of Laura. He attempts to cower down the kid:

Il frappe des mains et des pieds pour essayer d'effrayer le marmot. L'enfant tremble comme une feuille. Il a peur, très peur. Le président lui sourit pour le rassurer. Il lui donne des bonbons, des biscuits, il le laisse toucher sa hernie...

He clasps his hands and stamps his feet in an attempt to frighten the kid. The latter trembles like a leaf, afraid, very afraid. The president smiles to reassure him. He offers him sweets, biscuits, letting him to touch his hernia... (*L'Etat*, 87-88).

In response to Lopez's interrogation, the kid confesses that though his friends call him Laura, which is a nickname, he has nothing to do with Larsa Laura, the enemy of the State. Lopez's paranoia makes him difficult to convince. He orders his aide to hang the kid. Ironically, that does not save the situation for a few weeks later; he discovers that there are more faeces on the president's bed and in the whole town than ever before (*L'Etat*, 88). Through the use of the "double" which characterizes Tansi's baroque and surreal world, the characters invade the president's sacred space without being visualized by the State security. The presidential bed, symbol of the rulers erotic power, becomes a battlefield and a space of resistance while the ubiquity of the faeces underlines the

⁴ A notion popularised by Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), the Panopticon refers to a surveillance model conceived by the English utilitarian philosopher, Jeremy Bentham for the 19th century British penitentiary system. Through this surveillance regime, the penitentiary inspector is located in a central watchtower with non-transparent glass walls, making it difficult for the inmates to know for certain when he is present/absent. He "perpetually" sees but is never seen. Thus, the behaviour of the inmates is constantly being censored by the carceral system, a key dimension of the State repressive apparatus and subject formation. The Panopticon has thus become a metaphor for totalitarian forms of censorship through visuality and knowledge of the subjects.

generalized decadence of the president's power. The president's protruding phallus is the most visible aspect of his power and when he attempts to hide amongst the subjects to get an idea of what they are thinking and saying about his regime, his herniated phallus exposes his identity. It should be noted that Labou Tansi does not only make recourse to surrealist tactics to interpolate hegemonic surveillance, he inscribes his entire textuality within an artistic resistance to the exigencies of instrumental clarity in terms of motifs, settings and characters. The denial of absolute transparency, accessibility and readability in his narrative does align with the resistance to uncontested interpretation, objectification and utilitarian possession. To make recourse to Gerhard Richter's expression in his appraisal of corporeality in Walter Benjamin's corpus (2002, 81), "unhaunted" visuality or meaning formation in Labou Tansi is inconceivable and forms part and parcel of the authors anti-ideological aesthetics. To extend the metaphor further, textuality and its multiple possibilities of meanings can be conceived as a contestation of the state Panopticon and its subjectifying rationalities that are based on a supposedly unifying truth.

CONCLUSION

Visuality forms a vital component of knowledge formation strategies connected with the construction of hegemonic power. In the face of hegemonic visuality of the post-colonial state and the heritage of visual underpinnings of enlightenment that informed Western colonialism, postcolonial texts have responded with innovative modes of gazing back, interpolating and disrupting dominant visual codes and re-imagining non-totalising forms of power. The analogous mode of writing that transcribes these counter-visualities is the "graffiti text" which is discussed with regard to Labou Tansi's novels, especially, *The Eyes of the Volcano*. Writing after Enlightenment becomes a form of graffiti, disconcerting and dismantling visual certainties and underlying the remainder, that which is left out of the purview of the putatively omnivisual seer. However, it should not be misconstrued that all postcolonial authors respond to hegemonic visualities through burlesque and grotesque visual aesthetics. Such a claim would run the risk of undercutting the plurality and diversity of postcolonial writing traditions with regard to the deconstruction of hegemonic visualities and perspectives.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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