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Faces in the Mirror: Raymond Carver and the Intricacies of Looking

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ABSTRACT

It has repeatedly been pointed out that neo-realist texts are characterized by a particular visual quality, not only with regard to audiovisual devices featured thematically but also concerning their literary style, which at some point even came to be called “TV Fiction.” This essay attempts to show that, in order to appreciate the visual quality of neo-realism, we should shift our attention from the predominance of the image to a more complex understanding of visibility. Drawing on the concept of the gaze, I suggest that we have to examine closely how the act of looking is introduced as the crucial way of interrelating image and subject, and, more specifically, how it contributes to the emergence of new forms of self-knowledge. My case in point will be Raymond Carver’s minimal realism, which is characterized by a disjunction between voice and eye, speaking and looking. This disjunction has been linked with the notion of postmodern depthlessness, yet I would argue that it relates less to epistemological doubt than to the idea of a crisis of communication. Harking back to American modernism, the sensuousness of the material world is contrasted with the realm of speech in order to stress that visual and haptic forms of contact can compensate for the fundamental inadequacy of spoken language. Three different types of looking — the narcissistic, televisual, and cinematic gaze — will be discussed to elaborate questions of visualization in neo-realism.

When minimal realism came to be regarded as a major literary force in the 1980s, two aspects of particular interest were noticed which have since shaped theoretical debates. On the one hand, critics were impressed by the predominance of ordinary, domestic subjects; on the other, they marvelled at the “aggressive lucidity” of the literary style advocated by writers such as Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Mary Robison, or Tobias Wolff. In contrast to the expansiveness of postmodern literature “minimalism” appeared to be “like a microchip, highly functional, finely crafted, and polished to precision” (Herzinger 14).¹ Numerous suggestions were made as to what this new type of fiction should be called, ranging from Dirty Realism to K-Mart Realism, yet most critics seemed to agree that an important element was a new form of accessibility drawing on the representational promises of realistic writing. As Kim Herzinger summed it up: “‘Minimalist’ stories generally position the reader directly across the table, at eye level, where communication is most likely” (15).

The notion of eye level communication refers to the simplicity of design prevalent in minimalist writing and welcomed as a new reader orientation or ‘user friendliness.’ Yet it also alludes to the importance of non-verbal forms of communication crucial in stories lacking elaborate passages of direct speech. In this re-

¹ On the concept of minimalism, cf. Barth and Facknitz (“Menace of Minimalism”).

spect, Raymond Carver has come to be regarded as one of the most important authors—though, as I will argue, frequently misapprehended.² Since the late 1970s the visual quality of his stories and literary style has persistently been related to painting. Whether critics saw him as a minimalist, neo-realist, or postmodern writer, they usually called his lean, unadorned style “photo-realistic” (cf. Stull, Saltzman, Fluck, and Nessel). This analogy with photo- or hyper-realism grew out of the sense that certain themes and moods prevalent in photo-realistic paintings could also be discerned in Carver’s writings. Both art forms developed at roughly the same historical moment, in the late 1960s, and were seen as related aesthetic movements in American culture.

Yet even though notions of theme and mood seemed to point to similar perceptions of American society, many critics failed to notice that in terms of style, Carver and the photo-realists advocated radically different representational strategies. While painters such as Robert Bechtle, Richard Estes, or Ralph Goings strove for a representation of reality emulating the visual richness of photography, Carver’s highly condensed stories were, on the contrary, characterized by compression and reduction.³ Paradoxically, a literary style, which came to be known as *minimalism*, was routinely associated with visual images renowned for their finely wrought details and high density, i. e. their abundance of visual information. Critics failed to see that Carver’s images of suburbia were highly stylized and compressed mental images related to notions of an alienated self.

One consequence of the linkage was that Carver’s writing could be subsumed under the banner of postmodernism. Even though he seemed to return to certain elements of realism, so the argument went, he shared the photo-realists’ predilection for surface structures and their concomitant depthlessness. As Michael Trusler puts it: “The reader perceives the surface (event, description), but is incapable of penetrating the surface to discover the occluded meaning or structure that grants the surface its texture, its shape” (27-28). A closer look at his stories reveals, however, that Carver did not attempt to reproduce the minutiae of visual surface structures and consequently was not to be confused with the fleeting moments of pop-art’s snapshot paintings. Rather, his representation of reality was highly selective and reductive. He followed an aesthetic of abstraction, growing out of, but also transforming the experience of everyday life.

To be sure, Carver’s stories do not signify a simple return to traditional forms of realism ignorant of postmodern aesthetic strategies. Yet I would argue that references to the photo-realistic quality of his writing have obscured how and why questions of visualization are at the center of his neo-realist aesthetic. Frequently, Carver’s writing evokes the visual quality of painting, but it is crucial to realize that this is achieved by *competing* forms of visual exploration and representation. On the one hand, his stories are distinguished by various forms of looking, generating conflicting gazes and types of visualization. On the other hand, they introduce the theme of visualization not as an end in itself but as part of a desire to communicate. Since Carver’s characters experience verbal communication as prone to failure and frus-

² On Carver’s “blossoming” reputation, cf. Scott.

³ On Carver’s style, cf. Campbell, Nessel, and Facknitz (“Menace of Minimalism”).

tration, non-verbal forms serve as insufficient yet genuine attempts to compensate for this lack.⁴ The less Carver's characters talk, the more they observe. Thus, what to some critics appeared to be a variant of postmodern depthlessness is in fact an inability to communicate. This inability to express themselves adequately is not only a major cause of the characters' suffering, it also represents an important element of Carver's style. Lack and insufficiency must be answered by a search for new means of expression, and this search shapes the characters' as well as the reader's activity. In contrast to the photo-realists' high-density paintings, Carver presents sketches in need of supplementation. In order to be understood, they must be completed by a sympathetic dialogical imagination.⁵

Looking as an Act of Transformation

The inadequacy of spoken language is a recurrent theme in Carver's stories. Characters groping for words, not knowing what to say, or being unable to express themselves are a common feature of his blue-collar settings and serve as a major trope for the larger crisis of verbal communication. A case in point is the narrator of "Cathedral." Hesitant about a blind man who comes to visit his house, he is stunned to hear him say that, as an owner of two television sets, he prefers to turn on his color set: "I didn't know what to say to that. I had absolutely nothing to say to that. No opinion" (205). Ironically, as the story proceeds, watching television together will help both, the blind man and the narrator, to come to a new level of understanding. But at this point the inability to express himself verbally highlights a common dilemma of Carver's characters. Language is seen to be insufficient for a genuine and intimate form of communication. Talking creates distance, and those who talk self-assuredly are looked upon with suspicion. Consequently, Carver's characters are often portrayed as inarticulate, at a loss for the right word, while the act of looking produces a kind of knowledge on which the sense of their interiority can build.

The significance of this notion of interiority compensating for the inadequacy of spoken language was made apparent in Robert Altman's film *Short Cuts* (1993), based on a number of Carver's stories. In his adaptation for the screen, Altman created a fascinating network of cross-references between hitherto unconnected stories flowing smoothly into each other like an elaborate musical piece. Yet some critics noted that Altman introduced two narrative techniques which fundamentally changed the character of Carver's writing. Instead of sympathy they saw irony, while the subjectivity of internal thought had been translated into external action (cf. Gallagher, Stewart, Scofield, and Boddy). In Tess Gallagher's estimation, the effect of these changes was "to toughen and speed up what is tender and circuitous in Carver" (11). In the high-density mode of film images, Altman seemed incapable of representing the more meditative and blurry elements of Carver's ma-

⁴ On the importance of nonverbal signals, cf. Gearheart.

⁵ The crisis of communication in Carver's stories is elaborated by Gearheart and Shute.

terial. Most importantly, the tension between talking and observing, crucial to his exploration of subjectivity, played a much smaller role in Altman's film.⁶

Carver's disjunction between verbal and non-verbal forms of communication was first acknowledged in an insightful analysis by David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips: "If Carver's eye is that of the voyeur," they write, "his voice is that of dissociation" (81). Sight and speech, eye and voice are differentiated as distinct communicative levels in Carver's writing, generating different kinds of knowledge and insight. Consequently, Boxer and Phillips introduce the term voyeurism "to mean not just sexual spying, but the wistful identification with some distant, unattainable idea of self" (79). Dissociation, on the other hand, is understood as "a sense of disengagement from one's own identity and life, a state of standing apart from whatever defines the self, or of being unselfed" (79). In both cases they stress the feeling of inadequacy: gazing at an *unattainable* idea of self, *disengaging* verbally from the self. Yet they also note that Carver has endowed the act of looking with a new experiential force: "Looking itself becomes experience, not merely vicarious experience. It is a transforming act, one which changes the character of that which is seen" (79).

As Boxer and Phillips have pointed out, Carver undermines the hierarchy between verbal and non-verbal forms of communication to show that the struggle to express the self takes place on different levels. In "A Small, Good Thing," Ann Weiss realizes after the death of her child that she is unable to express her grief adequately. She thinks, "how unfair it was that the only words that came out were the sort of words used on TV shows where people were stunned by violent or sudden deaths. She wanted her words to be her own" (76). Yet, as this desire to find "words of one's own" is thwarted, alternative means of expressing the self must be foregrounded. Talking leads to alienation from the self and others, while looking or touching creates a feeling of closeness and sometimes even a sense of empathy. Pre-verbal, visual and haptic, forms are introduced to compensate for a communicative lack. However, since they are less elaborate they highlight a desire to communicate steeped in the discrepancies of ambiguous or fuzzy semiotic systems.

Boxer and Phillips focussed on the kind of voyeurism prevalent in stories like "Neighbors," where Bill Miller, tending to the empty apartment of his neighbors, begins to invade their privacy by observing the apartment closely: "He looked out the window, and then he moved slowly through each room considering everything that fell under his gaze, carefully, one object at a time" (13). However, a character's gaze can have a variety of implications in Carver's stories: it can signify reflexively the process of collecting and selecting material for (new) stories; it can be part of a voyeuristic act of spying, scanning and 'possessing' objects that help to transform the self; or it can imply that the self is placing him- or herself in the scene under observation. How characters look at objects and people, or how they are being looked at, provides not only vital bits of story information, it also underlines that the gaze in Carver's writing is an active process, implicated in re-

⁶ Robert Altman's adaptation must, however, also be seen in the context of his own work. In particular, the sense of farcical irony and the depthlessness of his characters have been persistent elements of his films since the early 1970s.

lations of knowledge and power. Looking in its most complex form becomes an act of self-examination.⁷

Carver's Regime of Gazes

Carver's stories must be carefully differentiated with regard to the question as to what the characters are looking at, how their gazes are qualified, and what they see.⁸ Three types of looking are particularly relevant since they take on a reflexive quality: looking into mirrors, watching television, and closely observing mundane objects or scenes. Looking into mirrors is a traditional device for the motif of self-analysis. Yet it is striking how often it figures prominently in Carver's work. Protagonists perusing their faces in moments of stress or in unusual environments can be found in numerous stories. On his first visit to the empty apartment of his vacationing neighbors, Bill Miller tends to the cat and plants, when slowly he is overpowered by a transgressive impulse: "Leaving the cat to pick at her food, he headed for the bathroom. He looked at himself in the mirror and then closed his eyes and then looked again" ("Neighbors" 10). He goes on to search the various rooms of the apartment, so that at this point looking into the mirror is like waking up in a strangely altered state, meeting the self in a new, more revealing and fascinating form. Later, as he puts on his neighbor's clothes, both male and female, he returns repeatedly to stare into mirrors, engaging in the silent pleasure of seeing his former self take on multiple appearances.

Carver's narrator is careful not to judge what Bill thinks of himself while he is observing himself in the mirror, inviting the reader to speculate on the thrills of cross-dressing. Yet a character's look into the mirror can also denote a decisive step toward a new level of self-knowledge. In this sense Al, the main character of "Jerry and Molly and Sam," whose life seems to be falling apart and who, in a desperate gesture to restore a sense of order, has abandoned the family dog, makes a vital discovery while looking into the mirror: "While he was shaving, he stopped once and held the razor in his hand and looked at himself in the mirror: his face doughy, characterless—*immoral*, that was the word. He laid the razor down. *I believe I have made the gravest mistake this time*" (165; original italics). For a brief

⁷ The concept of the gaze is adapted from film theory where it was developed in the context of psychoanalytic and apparatus theories. For our purpose, two aspects are most significant. The gaze not only refers to the visual object generated by the act of looking, i. e. the image; it also includes the activity of looking as such, i. e. the way looking contributes to the construction of a particular subject or subject position. To analyze the gaze, therefore, requires a close examination of 'image' and 'subject' in order to discern how the text presents their interrelationship. For different approaches concerning the concept of the gaze in film theory, cf. *The Sexual Subject*.

⁸ Care must be taken to distinguish between Carver's relatively short stories and his longer, more elaborate pieces (for an introductory generic analysis of the short story, cf. Pratt). My choice of examples relates to both types, though I have included only few references to his volume *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. A critical debate has raised the question to what extent the extreme brevity of some of the stories in this volume can be traced to revisions executed by editor Gordon Lish; cf. Max.

moment Al breaks through his reluctance to acknowledge that the chaos of family life is a consequence of his own making, a side-effect of his faulty “immoral” character. In this case, then, looking into the mirror triggers a psychological or moral insight that Carver underlines by interspersing brief passages of interior monologue. The act of looking conjures up the word “immoral” Al seems to have been looking for, yet he does not mention it in conversations with his wife. Self-knowledge generated by mirrors often remains at this subjective level without entering direct verbal communication.

Still, it should be obvious that looking into mirrors as a mode of self-analysis does not follow the (postmodern) trope of boundless forms of reflection unable to locate a sense of self. In Carver’s more complex stories (e. g. “Jerry and Molly and Sam” or “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”), looking into mirrors marks moments of moral or personal insight, while in his shorter stories it usually takes on the quality of a narcissistic gaze: an exaggerated form of self-interest trying to combat the feeling of emptiness or blankness. In both cases it represents a form of looking which allows glimpses into the characters’ personalities, revealing their attempt to integrate what they see with what they feel, to find the right words for images of the self.

Watching Television

If we can call the numerous faces in the mirrors among Carver’s stories a primary way of looking in, watching television can be understood as a way of looking out. Significantly, though, it is a way of looking out anchored in the domestic settings of the characters and thus serves to emphasize rather than overcome the fundamental passivity in their lives. It can signify the blank stare of an immobile audience, gathering in front of the television set in order to kill time, as in the drying-out facility of “Where I’m Calling From”: “I make it to a big chair that’s close to the radiator, and I sit down. Some guys look up from their TV. Then they shift back to what they were watching” (125). In this case, what exactly they are watching is not elaborated on, and, indicating the degree of their exhaustion, it doesn’t seem to make a difference. Watching television, then, can denote a routine daily activity that metonymically alludes to the repetitious and mechanical pattern of everyday life. Instead of engaging with what they see by looking out into the world, Carver’s characters tend to be drawn deeper into their domestic sphere.

On the other hand, watching television, just like looking into mirrors, has more complex implications, particularly when introduced as a competing narrative device influencing and interrelating with the action in the story. As has been pointed out, the force of Carver’s stories lies in their ability to undermine the habitual experience of everyday life by making the usual seem strange: “It is the familiar, the seemingly ‘known,’ which is the true mask of the terrifying” (Boxer and Phillips 83). To this end, watching television is a constant reminder of how quickly terror generated in the public sphere can invade the seeming calmness of the private realm. Highlighting the contingency of death and violence, narratives on television represent a subtle threat from the outside world, (technically) received in the deceptive seclu-

sion of the home. In the gin-soaked social gathering of “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” cardiologist Mel McGinnis summarizes a horrible highway accident: “Drunk kid, teenager, plowed his dad’s pickup into this camper with this old couple in it” (146). Watching television can have the similar effect of interjecting visions of sudden death. As Jack and Fran visit his work pal Bud in “Feathers,” a stock car race is running on television: “‘Maybe one of those damn cars will explode right in front of us,’ Fran said. ‘Or else maybe one’ll run up into the grandstand and smash the guy selling the crummy hot dogs’” (9).

Significantly, Fran imagines scenes more violent and brutal than the ones actually shown, obviously expecting the worst. In contrast to the introspective quality of looking into mirrors, then, watching television creates a different level of visualization. On the one hand, television’s regime of audiovisuality seems to block out more direct and open forms of communication, ritualizing an empty form of interaction in relationships that have lost their emotional basis. As Jack remarks about his marriage with Fran: “She and I talk less and less as it is. Mostly it’s just the TV” (23). On the other hand, the act of watching television is torn between two radically divergent emotional states: ignorance and hypersensitivity. Both reactions, staring passively at the television set or anticipating the worst to come, indicate that Carver’s characters feel a need to protect themselves against overpowering images. In this sense, watching television, like looking into mirrors, revolves around the theme of a split subject. Unable to find words to express the self, Carver’s protagonists also seem to lack an adequate emotional reaction in the face of disaster. Torn between extremes—silence and small-talk, disinterestedness and sentimentality—the notion of a split subject points to the central lack of his characters: the inability to express and integrate ambiguous feelings and the concomitant fear of shifting uncontrollably between radically divergent emotional states.⁹

Analyzing the Self

The exploratory nature of looking in and looking out can partly be explained by the fact that mirrors and television screens are technologies of visualization whose reflexive quality is an intrinsic aspect of their design. The third regime of looking that I want to focus on goes beyond this element of technological design. It includes what Boxer and Phillips define as a voyeuristic identification with an “unattainable idea of self” (79). Yet it need not necessarily or solely be seen as voyeuristic, i. e. performed in secrecy and fueled by forbidden desires. More fittingly, it can be characterized as the act of generating self-knowledge by a careful observation of mundane objects or scenes. Carver’s inarticulate characters often gain their first insights simply by looking. Middle-aged, married Arnold Breit, the in-

⁹ Obviously, neo-realism à la Carver also creates a ‘new psychology.’ Oscillating between antagonistic states of feeling, the subject does not see him- or herself as integrated or whole but rather as responding to various stimuli from the outside. The concomitant “poverty of spirit” is viewed critically by Facknitz (“Menace of Minimalism”).

hibited protagonist of “Are You a Doctor?” visits a woman who has mysteriously called him at home and wants to see him. Arriving at her apartment, he finds that she has gone out and waits for her:

He looked around. The room was lighted by a gold floor lamp that had a large ashtray and a magazine rack affixed to the pole. A television set stood against the far wall, the picture on, the volume low. A narrow hallway led to the back of the apartment. The furnace was turned up, the air close with a medicinal smell. Hairpins and rollers lay on the coffee table, a pink bathrobe lay on the couch. (36)

The passage serves as a descriptive introduction to the unknown woman’s apartment, yet it also sketches vital details establishing a mood that reflects Arnold’s hesitant state of mind. The “pink bathrobe” foreshadows that he will clumsily try to kiss the stranger, confused over their meeting in an atmosphere of intimacy without knowing each other but emanating a similar feeling of repressed discontent. Thus, intently observing a particular setting, the protagonist becomes aware of a sexually charged object, which corresponds with his hidden desires. Other examples show even more explicitly how watching a scene can generate self-knowledge. In “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” Ralph and Marian are experiencing a marital crisis after she admits to a sexual affair. Ralph remembers the time when they were honeymooning in Mexico and he watched his wife leaning motionless on the balustrade of their apartment:

She wore a white blouse with a bright red scarf at her throat, and he could see her breasts pushing against the white cloth. He had a bottle of dark, unlabeled wine under his arm, and the whole incident put Ralph in mind of something from a film, an intensely dramatic moment into which Marian could be fitted but he could not. (229).

Again, as in the passage from “Are You a Doctor?”, observing a brief, “intensely dramatic moment” introduces images with sexual connotations. But in this case the observer is not only characterized as sexually intimidated (and ultimately inadequate), he evaluates the act of looking as a painful flash of self-recognition. Since Carver’s narrator qualifies the scene as “something from a film” it is tempting to call Ralph’s act of looking a cinematic gaze helping to establish a particular mode of narration. Many of Carver’s stories are characterized by these prolonged passages of observation introducing a particular setting and combining this descriptive passage with subtle reflections about place: How does the character fit into the scene he or she is watching? Visual exploration of space thus creates an establishing shot of the setting and, at its most distinctive, also serves as an assessment of how and where the self can be placed into the scene.

Toward the end of the story a scene mirroring Ralph’s earlier flashback vision of the honeymoon underlines this narrative device. After a night of drinking and gambling, Ralph returns to his home, still undecided how he should act. He watches his wife sleeping and, just as in Mexico, puzzled and insecure, tries to come to terms with his place in the scene before him:

She was sleeping, her head off the pillow, turned toward the wall, her hair black against the sheet, the covers bunched around her shoulders, covers pulled up from the foot of the bed. She was on her side, her secret body angled at the hips. He stared. What after all,

should he do? Take his things and leave? Go to a hotel? Make certain arrangements? How should a man act, given these circumstances? (249)

In a mild subversion of gender stereotypes, Ralph realizes at this point that he—the man—precisely does *not* know how to act. The experience of a personal crisis often leads Carver's male protagonists to retreat and a heightened state of self-pity rather than decisive action. Earlier, as Ralph wanders aimlessly through the night, his feeling of vulnerability is evoked on entering a liquor store: "A bell over the door tinkled. Ralph almost wept from the sound of it" (241). How the self can be included in a scene, therefore, often leads to a notion of lack and inconclusiveness—in this case the lack of marital 'normalcy' and the consequent emotional destabilization of the male protagonist. Yet the crucial point about the passage with regard to the analysis of different types of looking is that observation and self-analysis are intimately linked and take on an active quality, which the (male) characters are incapable of in a more literal sense.

Thus, we can distinguish between three basic types that I have tentatively (and heuristically) called the narcissistic, televisual, and cinematic gaze. What the characters are looking at, how their look is qualified, and how it affects their (self-) knowledge becomes vitally important against the background of a pervasive feeling of speechlessness. In Carver's work the gaze takes on numerous forms (more than mentioned above), yet two aspects are crucial. Firstly, gazing invites a consideration of place and self. It revolves around the issue of how the observer fits into the scene he or she is watching (and describing). Secondly, it is presented as an activity creating a special bond between the observer and the person or object looked at. Thus, the gaze negotiates levels of proximity and distance, involvement and retreat, which have both metaphorical and literal implications. The narcissistic gaze is a close form of self-perusal while the televisual gaze is (by definition) far removed from the scene being watched; yet both forms of looking can lead to surprising discoveries—e. g. that closeness uncovers a feeling of alienation while distance may ignite emotional involvement.

Still, the various types of looking can thus be summarized: the narcissistic gaze represents a form of introspection, the televisual gaze signifies looking out at the (mediated) world while the cinematic gaze establishes a (self-reflexive) form of looking which acknowledges the observer as a participant in a narrative sequence. All types indicate that in Carver's writing eye contact as a specific form of communication is of central importance. However, as the discussion in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" suggests, this may not always be clear to the protagonists. In the aftermath of the dreadful highway accident, having saved the old couple's life in numerous operations, cardiologist Mel McGinnis finds out that the old man is not suffering so much from the accident but from having his field of vision impaired. Unbelievably, he recalls: "I'm telling you, the man's heart was breaking because he couldn't turn his goddamn head and *see* his goddamn wife" (151).

Looking and Everyday Life

In its movement between images of extreme violence, notions of love, and states of drunken stupor, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” establishes a precarious balance between the domestic sphere and a hostile outside world. The notion of home as an enclosed and protective space together with the relationship between private and public, self and community, is constantly challenged. On the one hand, it is undermined by communication technologies threatening to invade the home with visual and verbal messages. On the other hand, Carver’s protagonists usually come to realize that the evil they are trying to hide from resurfaces in the midst of their most intimate relationships. It signifies, after all, the suppressed desire or violent urge of their dissociated selves, indicating that longing to retreat into a protected private space must be seen as the ultimate form of self-delusion.

Still, the predominance of the commonplace is an important aspect of Carver’s writing, and the domestic fiction of the minimalists in general. It harks back to the modernist project of a democratic art capable of addressing, and situated within, the realm of everyday life. Like William Carlos Williams or Charles Sheeler, Carver investigates the ‘thingness’ of ordinary experience in an attempt to discover patterns capable of structuring that world in meaningful ways.¹⁰ To this end, looking becomes an exploratory act in pursuit of experience and knowledge. Yet in contrast to the earlier modernists, Carver frames this attempt with a pervasive sense of impoverishment, both in terms of the subject’s intuitive faculties and the sensuous quality of his or her environment. Urban landscapes and technological progress, hallowed symbols of modernity, have degenerated into suburban parking lots and “Styrofoam cups.” Colors, textures, shades of light are not featured prominently in Carver’s stories. Rather, the impoverishment of suburbia corresponds with an impoverishment of stimuli for the senses.

Similarly, the experience of everyday life, in its ritualized and routine aspects, is often portrayed as frustrating or even depressing. Yet at the same time it is highly valorized as the only mode of existence there is. Thus, although ordinariness is the cause of the characters’ discontent and suffering, they desperately cling to it as soon as it is being threatened. Frequently, this constitutes Carver’s existentialist twist: caught inside a stifling and pointless everyday existence, his characters nevertheless panic as they feel their miserable existence slipping from them. And Carver makes sure that it does slip by introducing a sense of menace that creates a feeling of shifting ground: temporary moments of destabilization demonstrating to the characters their helplessness and inability to act decisively or to change the course of their fate.¹¹ The struggle of Carver’s characters to find “words of their own” is, therefore, situated in the larger context of a democratic art finding it increasingly difficult to identify the extraordinary within the ordinary or to assign spiritual values to mundane objects. Anchoring aesthetic experience in the every-

¹⁰ Carver calls Williams one of his literary ‘heroes’, cf. McCaffery and Gregory. On the history of Sheeler and Williams, cf. Marling, Orvell, Rourke, and Lucic.

¹¹ On the prevalence of this sense of menace, cf. Powell and Carver (“On Writing”).

day world is hampered by the impoverishment of its material texture, while mass mediated disasters threaten to overpower the perceptive faculties pivotal for a discriminating look.

Thus, Carver's neo-realist aesthetic is ultimately more concerned with the *longing* for discoveries in the ordinary world than the actual depiction of the discoveries themselves, offering only sketches of moments of truth or insight. Yet it could be argued that this feeling of unfulfilled desire constitutes a crucial aspect of his stories pointing beyond the "smallness of vision" that Carver found fault with regarding the term minimalism (cf. Herzinger). In his early stories, the act of looking generates self-knowledge in order to overcome the inadequacy of spoken language that is undermining interpersonal relationships. In his later work, a subtle shift seems to occur as to the significance of non-verbal forms of communication. Now they are introduced as a remedy, however ephemeral and incomplete, for the difficulties of human interaction. As Carver opens up the marital settings of his more complex stories, the act of looking not only enhances intimate relationships, it also comes to denote, metaphorically, artistic creation as such.

Discovering the Haptic

This shift is most obvious in "Cathedral," the story about a blind man visiting a married couple (cf. Facknitz ["Human Worth"], Brown, and Gearheart). Years ago the woman worked for him, reading from case studies and reports. After moving away she has kept in touch by exchanging tapes. Now, as he is about to enter their home, the prejudiced and apprehensive husband tells the story of their meeting, revealing anxieties and jealousy concerning his wife's former acquaintances. In contrast to "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," the importance of eye contact is acknowledged as a crucial communicative factor of intimate relationships. In fact, the narrator justifies his apprehensiveness concerning the blind visitor by imagining what it must be like to be married to a blind man:

Imagine a woman who could never see herself as she was seen in the eyes of her loved one. A woman who could go on day after day and never receive the smallest compliment from her beloved. A woman whose husband could never read the expression on her face, be it misery or something better. (200)

The scornful ignorance of the narrator, who at the beginning of their meeting wishes the blind visitor would wear dark glasses, changes in the course of the story. Slowly he comes to realize that not being able to "read" a woman's face does not mean being unable to communicate non-verbally. While the three of them end the evening smoking marijuana and watching television (the wife falling asleep), the narrator happens upon a channel showing a documentary on the history of famous cathedrals. At length he tries to describe to the blind man what the cathedrals on television look like. However, after a few futile attempts and finding his expressive (verbal) power too limited, he finally gives up. Ingeniously, the blind man suggests he should *draw* a cathedral, and at this point a new level of understanding develops between the two strangers, founded on an attempt at non-verbal ex-

change. The narrator gathers rough paper and enthusiastically begins to draw the cathedral, working himself into a kind of creative frenzy. All the while, the blind man's hand is riding on top of his to feel the shapes and forms evolving: "I took up the pen again, and he found my hand. I kept at it. I'm no artist. But I kept drawing just the same" (213).

By remarking that he is no artist, the narrator stresses the artlessness and lack of refinement of the drawing, yet it is obvious that the act of creation is the crucial experiential force of this scene. The unleashing of creativity opens up new forms of communication and thus, almost too obviously, highlights the role of art as a tool for individual and interpersonal growth. After the drawing is finished, the blind man encourages his host to look at the result. But he prefers to keep his eyes closed, seemingly on the verge of a discovery that requires the blocking out of eyesight: "My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything. 'It's really something,' I said" (214).

Thus, the narrator of "Cathedral" moves from ignorance to insight, from prejudice to openness, from passivity to creative breakthrough and, apparently, also to a kind of spiritual revelation. Most importantly, the story demonstrates how Carver expands on his theme of non-verbal communication as the crucial factor in human relationships. In the final scene, looking means looking inward. Thus, the motif of gathering (self-) knowledge through a particular gaze is supplemented by the idea of seeing with eyes closed. On the one hand, this can be understood as a philosophical expansion of earlier themes, pointing toward a more general notion of perception. On the other hand, and probably closer to Carver's conceptual claims, it has palpable implications. Seeing with eyes closed introduces the importance of haptic forms of communication, primarily touching. Furthermore, if understood metaphorically, it relates to the power of the imagination. While in the beginning of "Cathedral" the narrator pities the blind man for being unable to read a woman's face, he ultimately comes to appreciate that this disability can be overcome by touching and artistic creation. Haptic forms of communication establish new levels of intimacy and exchange.

Significantly, this celebration of concreteness refers back to American modernist movements. Among the televised cathedrals in Carver's story the narrator ultimately focuses on "the famous one in Paris, with its flying buttresses and its spires reaching up to the clouds" (209). By accident he has come across images of Chartres Cathedral, yet by choosing it as the model for his drawing he incorporates a building, which was the subject of a famous series of photographs by Charles Sheeler. Sheeler found that by abstracting certain details of the building he could highlight structural similarities between cathedrals and industrial buildings, especially Ford's River Rouge plant. Carver invokes a similar aesthetic process. Transferring an object from one medium to another—in this case from a visual representation on television to a rough and tactile image on paper—creates a new object capable of generating novel insights and new forms of human interaction. Artistic creation in both cases includes a dematerialization of objects from the real world in order to change ways of perceiving and looking at them. Its main objective becomes a change of perspective for the viewer and, consequently, also the reader.

With “Cathedral” as our reference point we could concede that Carver’s neo-realist stories continue to spell out Malcolm Bradbury’s notion of a “moral conception of humanism” (24). Yet it has been argued that, in general, they are characterized by an inability to create a coherent representation of reality in a moral, psychological, or conceptual sense, differentiating them from classical realism (cf. Stull, Fluck, and Nessel). Judging from the inconclusiveness of many stories and the rarity of epiphanic moments of truth, this observation is certainly valid. However, due to their particular mode of narration the feeling of lack and helplessness also becomes a source of their strength. As Herzinger rightly emphasizes, “one of the crucial characteristics of ‘minimalist’ writing is its profound uneasiness with irony as a mode of presentation” (14). The inability to create a coherent representation of reality is, therefore, not framed by a smart or ironic narrator reflecting upon epistemological or socio-cultural reasons (e. g. limitations of language, pervasiveness of mass-mediated images) but is ultimately seen to be an individual deficiency, a personal defect.

Thus, the eschewing of irony ensures that, at its core, Carver’s writing conveys an authentic feeling of suffering. Lack of coherence is not understood meta-fictionally — as doubt concerning the referential status of language. Rather, it is cause for individual pain and the genuine desire to find new ways of self-expression and communication. Notwithstanding the frequent lapses into sentimentality, I would argue that this (realistic) representation of a deep feeling of suffering is crucial for the accessibility and success of Carver’s writing.¹² It epitomizes what his stories manage to communicate at the “eye level” of their minimalistic design, following less from a high-density style than from incomplete and fragmentary sketches. As Bradbury points out, neo-realism of the 1970s and 1980s could be highly ironical. Yet in Carver’s case we find that the difficulty of speaking, the struggle of finding words, is not meant to be amusing. On the contrary, it highlights the seriousness of an individual desire to overcome the crisis of communication by drawing on, but ultimately going beyond, haptic and visual forms of contact.

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¹² Carver’s sentimental streak is noted by Saltzman and Fluck.

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