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“GIVE THE PEOPLE WHAT THEY WANT”: BODIES ON DISPLAY IN MARLENE VAN NIEKERK’S TRIOMF

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Abstract
Marlene van Niekerk’s Triomf has attained both literary acclaim and notoriety since it was first published in Afrikaans in 1994 (English translation 1999). This darkly comic novel is set at the dawn of the democratic election and as such, the fictional context mirrors the historical moment in which it was published. The novel relates the misadventures of the incestuous and indigent Afrikaans family, the Benades, whose grotesque bodies are described in minute detail. The paper examines the reason for this visceral corporeality in the context of Louise Bethlehem’s classification of the post-apartheid literary canon as one “in which the abject body is a privileged trope.”

During apartheid, relationships were governed by racist laws, stereotypes, and perceptions (rather than intimate conversations or reciprocal interactions). Van Niekerk explores this dominance of the visual in encounters with others, and in the process unpacks the “ensemble of practices” which made up what Allen Feldman calls the apartheid “scopic regime.” Van Niekerk enquires whether looking at the other could potentially facilitate empathy and understanding, or whether this remains merely an act of voyeurism. In this regard, the paper examines the meaning of the motif of binoculars and peepholes in Triomf, and argues that the Benades’ thwarted desire for connection and empathy is enacted through the visual medium. The reader, too, acts as literary voyeur, yet in this manner begins to care for and empathize with the Benades.

In conclusion, Van Niekerk’s visceral descriptions should not be classified as merely sensationalist or exhibitionist. Rather they represent an ethical intervention and an attempt to explore the formation of intimate relationships which, for Van Niekerk, are always mediated by the body.

Keywords
apartheid, bodies, empathy, scopic regime, voyeurism

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INTRODUCTION

Marlene van Niekerk’s acclaimed first novel, Triomf (1994/1999), celebrates the corporeal in all its visceral minutiae. However, this aspect of her fiction has been generally ignored in the
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It is the aim of this paper to correct this critical occlusion by presenting an analysis of the bodies of the protagonists of Triomf and to affirm the ethical importance of Van Niekerk’s visceral somatic descriptions. The paper will first discuss what Feldman terms the apartheid “scopic regime” (qtd. in Bethlehem 82) before examining the dominance of the visual in interactions in the novel. In this regard, the aim is to explore the utility of the leitmotif of binoculars and peepholes for understanding relationships with others.

The title quote for this paper is taken from Marlene Dumas’s February 1993 exhibition in Rotterdam, sardonically titled “Give the People What They Want.” The painting of the same name depicts a young girl holding open a cloth or towel to reveal her nudity. In this exhibition, the figure of the naked girl is repeated in different poses: blindfolded with arms raised high, suggesting innocence or surrender (“Justice”), and staring off to the side, possibly smirking (“Liberty”). In her “artist’s statement” for the exhibition, Dumas writes:

1994 will see the first-ever introduction of the democratic vote for all peoples in South Africa. I wouldn’t mount this show with this title there now. And as Spike Lee would say: if you don’t understand why not, you’re probably white. (93)

I contend that the above statement provides a useful framework in which to consider Triomf and its historical context. In a sense, Triomf is the literary equivalent of the show that Dumas was reluctant to mount in South Africa in 1994. Van Niekerk “gives the people what they want” by exposing the simultaneously hilarious and shocking lives of the neighborhood pariahs, the Benades—she reveals their grotesque bodies, and revels in this revelation. In Triomf, she exposes the poverty-stricken and desperate narratives of a group of fictional Afrikaners that the National Party, with its racist rhetoric, did its utmost to conceal and, in so doing, exposes the absurdity of the ideology of Afrikaner supremacy underpinning apartheid. To quote Dumas again, “It was a compliment when someone once described my work as Cheap Thrills. It wasn’t meant as a compliment” (93). The same ambiguity exists, to a degree, in the reception of van Niekerk’s novel.

Triomf was published in the original Afrikaans in 1994, and Leon de Kock’s English translation appeared five years later. In this sense, the novel exists as a transitional novel par excellence as its fictional content reflects the historical context. Triomf has garnered a considerable amount of critical attention and achieved a kind of cult-status in Afrikaans literature (Van Coller). Most reviewers have focused on the various ways in which Van Niekerk deconstructs the mythology and ideology that served to sustain Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid. The Benades are thus seen as the horrifying result of the insularity of apartheid doctrine taken to its incestuous yet logical extreme, “That which belongs together must remain together” (127), as Old Pop would...
say. In this regard, the novel’s reception has also centered on the questions it is said to raise regarding the fate of the Afrikaner in the new democratic dispensation.

*Triomf* writes back to and positions itself at a critical distance from the Afrikaans literary canon (Oliphant; Viljoen). Van Der Merwe refers to it as “‘n moderne variant van die Ampie-geskiedenis; die uitbeelding van die arm Afrikaners.” I will suggest that its depiction of “poor Afrikaners” can be compared with, or considered in some ways as the literary equivalent to, David Goldblatt’s *Some Afrikaners* (1975). However, *Triomf* is not simply a “modern Ampie-tale”; it parodies and satirizes the conventions of the romanticized “plaasroman” (farm novel) and the “voorstadsroman” (novel of the town or city) (Van Coller). Van Niekerk’s inventive use of the Afrikaans language, her intermingling of formal ideologically-loaded phrases, religious expressions with everyday slang and expletives, also mark this novel as a departure from Afrikaans tradition (as well as her own previous writing). Indeed, Van Niekerk seems to relish the coarseness and vulgarity that has perhaps caused the biggest outcry from readers (and also ironically the most admiration and praise).

*Triomf* can also be seen as a realization of Van Niekerk’s contribution to protecting what she calls “creative closure” and her insistence on the endurance of a Puck figure in literature, “to blow wind through the holy heads of holy cows and holy whitewashed commissars” (3). In *Triomf*, there are no holy cows left untouched and this is precisely what Van Niekerk argues is needed in post-apartheid literary works. This aspect of *Triomf* has been elucidated by Willie Burger. He likens Treppie Benade to the “Dionisiese [Dionysian] monster of Zarathustra” (“Also sprach Treppie” 4) who eschews all attempts to narrate history, to euphemize reality with language. This objection to what Treppie calls “wallpaper” has been explored by Burger, Van Der Merwe, and Van Coller. Burger suggests that for Treppie, “‘n Mens is juis liggaamlik en daarin is die primêre belewing van die werlikheid geleë” (“Also sprach Treppie” 12). That is, the only reality that can be relied on is the material reality that is experienced through the body. It is this suggestion that I wish to extend in a discussion of the material reality depicted in *Triomf*. I argue that by “displaying these bodies,” Van Niekerk is not merely depicting abjection or indulging the reader’s voyeuristic urges, rather she is enquiring whether empathy and intimate relations can be fostered through an engagement with the bodies of others, and thus whether a form of communication can be conceived of beyond the myths on which apartheid was based.

**SCOPIC REGIMES**

During apartheid, relationships were governed by racist laws, stereotypes, and perceptions (rather than intimate conversations or reciprocal interactions). Van Niekerk explores this
dominance of the visual in encounters with others and in the process unpacks the “ensemble of practices” which made up the apartheid “scopic regime,” that is, “an ensemble of visual practices that produces a socially sanctioned form of facticity” (Bethlehem 82). In other words, these ways of seeing others justify and produce a certain way of being or mode of existence. In this context, Bethlehem is referring to Allen Feldman’s definition of a “scopic regime”:

By scopic regime I mean the agendas and techniques of political visualization: the regimens that prescribe modes of seeing and object visibility and that proscribe or render untenable other modes and objects of perception. A scopic regime is an ensemble of practices and discourses that establish the truth claims, typicality, and credibility of visual acts and objects and politically correct modes of seeing. (qtd. in Bethlehem 107)

The apartheid scopic regime was a form of state-sanctioned myopia; it (attempted to) limit visual practices such that what was seen, who was seen, where they were seen and the manner in which they were seen accorded strictly with apartheid racial ideology and its explicit hierarchy. Whiteness, then, was the norm, such that the white body itself becomes invisible, and the political implications of blackness seem inextricably connected with the black body. During apartheid, people were coded according to what they looked like, according to what the National Party government saw when they looked at you. Sight, indeed, was the sense which the apartheid government relied on to ensure the success of its discriminatory policies. The sense of being constantly under observation and subject to state surveillance is emphasized in Triomf as a police helicopter is often remarked upon, circling the sky above. In response to this ever-present helicopter, Lambert Benade encourages his family to gather outside the house “So the neighbors and the people in the helicopter could see the Benades had nothing to hide” (Triomf 271). Being seen then is equated with a kind of innocence and assertion of one’s right to be seen.

If the Other is only seen, never touched, or listened to, or spoken with, then dehumanizing the Other seems to follow more effortlessly. In a similar vein, in the context of a discussion on Dumas’s work, Mbembe and Nuttall ask, “What happens to intimate relations when politics has moved to the body, leaving its traces all over the face of the other, of my neighbor, of the stranger?” (128). The traces of apartheid were inscribed on and visible on the bodies of Others, and thus, I argue, intimate relations must stem from a bodily interaction, from an attempt to rethink the bodies of Others.

This scopic regime is, to a lesser political degree, also characteristic of city living; sight is the sense which dominates in the city. This is relevant as Triomf is a city novel, a novel in which...
Johannesburg itself assumes almost apocalyptic proportions. Raban argues that in the city, it is surfaces that dominate and there is no easy intimacy: “most of us shrink from contact with strangers; we don’t want to touch one another or feel that close to the stink of someone else’s life” (12). As Raban continues,

We still find it hard to face the elementary truth of life in big cities: that in them we are necessarily dependent on surfaces and appearances a great deal of the time, and that it is to surfaces that we must learn to attend with greater sympathy and seriousness. (91)

This is a thought echoed by Treppie when he describes the preparations to “get things ready” for Lambert’s birthday: “even if just on the surface, ‘cause it was appearance that counted” (364). When one has to rely on stereotypes and surfaces, it is all the more insidious when these stereotypes have been codified into policy and law by the government. Apartheid relied on the dominance of sight, on ensuring that people would not talk—honestly and sincerely—to each other, touch each other, or “feel that close to the stink of someone else’s life,” and thus have no sense of a shared humanity. It is within this dominant historical and ideological framework that one must consider the experiences of Van Niekerk’s fictional characters.

Moreover, postcolonial theory proves useful in understanding the implications for interpersonal relationships when these surfaces that should be “attended to” are bodily ones. Elleke Boehmer argues that in the colonial context, “the body of the other can represent only its own physicality, its strangeness” (270, my emphasis). In this case, the body is contrasted with mind (which was represented by the colonialist) and is the lesser valued of the binary pair, as Grosz has argued. Thus, to be embodied in this sense not only indicates lesser value or even a denial of mind, but quite simply, as Mbembe suggests, the denial of personhood (On the Postcolony 187).

As Katy Davis claims, “By imprisoning the other in her/his body, privileged groups are able to take on a god’s eye view as disembodied subjects” (10). The conflation of “god’s eye view” and disembodiment is interesting here. Disembodiment or “mind” refers not only to “thought” or “scientific/rational discourse,” but also to sight, to being able to see the body of the other as opposed to being a body, watched from afar. Furthermore, this seeing subject’s perspective is akin to that of the god’s: the colonist sees from above so that his perspective immediately implies god-like, unimpeachable power. According to apartheid logic the whites, as privileged group, are disembodied, their bodies all but invisible, while “non-whites” (in the horrific negating terminology of the regime) are bound to their bodies—to be exploited as bodies. When white bodies are visible, it is usually the bodies of white women, who are seen as objects of desire by the “male imperial gaze” (Schmidt 99). That too is quashed by Van Niekerk. None of her protagonists are depicted as
sexually desirable. Their sexual interactions are based on power relations, childlike innocence and loneliness, incestuous exploitation and rape. Nevertheless, Van Niekerk insists that the bodies of her white protagonists be *seen*; their fragile, failing grotesque bodies take center stage.

Leon de Kock, who translated the novel into English, phrases his response to *Triomf* along these lines:

> This novel draws its readers into a quite spectacular literary-symbolic engagement with whiteness, dramatizing the Trojan Horse of inner instability, the wildness within, repressed and hidden, that gives the lie to whiteness as a monolithic entity, a composed and neutral zone that observes aberrations from the norm in others, but is itself unimpeachable. (23)

The Benades are neither composed nor neutral; they are abhorrent. And yet, they are empathetic. De Kock continues that *Triomf* “is perhaps the most extreme example in South African literature of whiteness as a cloistered, fenced-off, and ideologically amputated zone of being” (24). And this zone of being is necessarily and explicitly an embodied one.

**APPROACHING THE OTHER**

In search of an alternative manner in which to consider relations of looking, I follow Schmidt’s approach in her article on “scopophilic desires.” Schmidt refers to the feminist film critic E. Ann Kaplan who formulates the problem thus:

> The question is how to move beyond the literal fact of subject-object looking, with its necessarily objectifying implications. How can people move to an understanding of subjectivity and mutuality on the level of approaching an Other? (qtd in Schmidt 93).

Kaplan’s question, is, I maintain, one which occupies and underpins Van Niekerk’s work. The question is whether mutuality can ever be achieved in the sphere of the visual, whether looking can ever be reciprocal, or can it only exist in the realm of objectification. Schmidt answers this dilemma by proposing that rather than “[t]he surreptitious use of the gaze,” a visual relationship based on mutuality is needed, “an intersubjective looking-relationship that is grounded in mutuality rather than asymmetrical displays of power” (97). This is a useful distinction in attempting to resolve the difference between (potentially) reciprocal visual encounters and a gaze which implies
a hierarchical power relation, and one to which I will return in my discussion of voyeurism and spying in *Triomf*.

**TOWARD A DEFINITION OF EMBODIED SUBJECTIVITY**

Postcolonial critics attempt to challenge the formulation of the mind/body binary—in a number of varied ways. However, I argue that even in this consideration and in the process of writing back to colonialism, the mind/body binary is still implied (even if the intent is to reverse the value of the pair). For this reason, a definition of embodied subjectivity which transcends this binary is needed. I have adopted Grosz’s broad definition of embodied subjectivity. Grosz was reacting against the theoretical discursivization or de-corporealizing of the body and the binary logic used to discuss subjectivity/identity. Her central thesis is that Cartesian dualism is not a useful model for understanding embodied subjectivity; she proposes instead that “subjectivity [be] understood as fully material and for materiality to be extended and to include and explain the operations of language, desire, and significance (210). Grosz’s formulation allows for a critical discussion of the machinations of power, which are inscribed on the surface of bodies, and a simultaneous recognition of the impact of these processes on the psyche, as well as an awareness of the “material” or anatomical features of bodies. In the course of my analysis, embodied subjectivity is thus understood as irreducible to mere fleshy body or discourse or psyche or socio-political forces, and is instead a complex, simultaneous interplay of these.

**TRIOMF**

*Triomf* was published (in the original Afrikaans) and set in 1994, at the dawn of the new democratic era in South Africa. It chronicles the misadventures of a family of indigent Afrikaners. The incestuous Benades live in a ramshackle house in *Triomf*, the whites-only suburb built in the early 1960s on the ruins of the razed multiracial suburb of Sophiatown. Triomf means “triumph” in English, just as the erection of this suburb was supposed to imply the triumph of the apartheid government and the ideal of Afrikaner nationalism. Van Niekerk’s novel reveals the irony in this name and the title exists as a kind of rhetorical question. The Benades consist of Mol, her brothers Pop and Treppie, and their “monstrous” son Lambert. They are neighborhood pariahs, ostracized by the whole street based primarily on their behavior, their grotesque bodies, and the poverty explicit in their appearance. Lambert reports on a neighbor’s complaints about the family:
about Pop’s zips that always hung open, and his mother [Mol] who walked around with no panties all day long. And that they must watch out before he mobilized the whole neighborhood against them, ‘cause they were sticking out like a sore finger. (276)

Lambert’s lineage remains mysterious: Mol is his mother and he is—unbeknownst to him—definitely the product of incest but it is unknown whether Pop or Treppie is his father. Nevertheless, a story is devised by Treppie to explain to Lambert that Pop is a very distant family relative and is his father. Lambert discovers the secret of his origins on election day, with disastrous consequences.

The novel’s narrative structure plays with the idea of surfaces and depth, of the experience of embodied subjectivity and body image. Each chapter is told in the third person narrative style, but Mol, Pop, Treppie, and Lambert alternate as the focalizer of each chapter. Thus the reader is encouraged to feel empathy for the focalizer and simultaneously recall the other family members’ often less than sympathetic perspective of that character. This narrative structure facilitates or illustrates Grosz’s definition of embodied subjectivity: the Benades are simultaneously seen as both objects and subjects, as body and mind. It is for this reason, as I will argue, that the Benades are not merely abject, or rather are not abject merely for the sake of provoking shock or horror. Their abjection prompts an ethical response.

**BINOCULARS**

Binoculars function as a leitmotif in this novel (and indeed recur frequently in Van Niekerk’s oeuvre). I will first briefly discuss the general symbolism of binoculars prior to discussing a few incidents involving the binoculars in the novel to illustrate my arguments.

If, the “medium is the massage” as McLuhan famously insisted, and “all media are extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical” (26), then it follows to ask what the message of the binoculars is. Binoculars could be understood as a proxy—even a hyperbole—for the sense of sight. The binoculars are an extension of the eye. They function in order to make that which is far, close—in this sense they ostensibly act to collapse the distance separating the audience and the spectacle being viewed. There is thus an *illusion* of closeness, but the spectator remains separated from that which he or she is *watching*. The spectator might for an instant believe that the spectacle being viewed is close enough to touch (that in fact is the binoculars’ illusory claim to fame, their purpose), but the only sense which can truly be heightened is that of sight. Binoculars may thus thwart a desire to be a part of an event, but can also foster spying, in which case there is a
desire to remain separate or hidden, to be an invisible observer. Binoculars do not foster reciprocity at all but reinforce the disembodied “god’s eye view.”

In the novel, Lambert attains a pair of binoculars (and a gun) in exchange for some meal vouchers from Spur (which the Benades won and he subsequently stole). He makes this deal with a man, Sonnyboy, whom he meets at the local garbage dump. De Kock’s nuanced analysis of this pivotal exchange is based on the visual interaction between Lambert and Sonnyboy, and the fact that, although he can see Sonnyboy, Lambert remains incapable of “reading” him, or of interpreting what it is he sees since Sonnyboy eludes all the apartheid racial categories and stereotypes (24-28). As De Kock maintains, Lambert’s inability to understand Sonnyboy illustrates “this deep isolation, this loss of mastery, [which] is the nub of the matter” (25). De Kock points out that,

When Lambert says to him that it’s “hard to say” where Sonnyboy comes from, the trickster-figure from the dumps replies in tones of the purest irony, the kind of knowing irony that his life has taught him to master: “Jy moet mos sommer aan my kan sien, hey, boss?” or, in the UK version of the translation, “You’re supposed to be able to tell just by looking at me, hey, boss?” (Van Niekerk 1999a, 275). This further leads to Lambert’s confusion and Sonnyboy’s dark jesting (“now you must please explain, my man, want ek’s mos maar net a damn kaffer”), until Sonnyboy finally finds the triumphal note, the real “triumph” or “triomf,” in the Symbolic order: “Hear, hear! . . . Hierie whitey kannie my classify nie!” (“This whitey can’t classify me” in the UK version [1999a, 275]). The extent to which this crowning moment of symbolic mastery turns the tables on whiteness, or the orthodox version of Apartheid whiteness for which Lambert is a proxy, cannot be overstated. (27)

The irony and failure of the apartheid system of taxonomy—a system based on sight—is here rendered explicit in De Kock’s accomplished interpretation.

I wish to extend this argument by tracing the fate of these binoculars and their implications for “intersubjective looking-relations” (Schmidt 97). Firstly, however, it is worth discussing what Lambert sees the first time he uses the binoculars. Sonnyboy draws his attention to the graffiti on the rubbish containers at the dump:

“One settler, one bullet,” Lambert reads. The letters have been scratched with a nail onto the rusted side of the container…. Daai kak is all over the city geskrywe, man. Kill this, kill that, one this, one that, viva this, viva that, long live this, that and the other. I love the NP, I love Dingaan, I love Tokyo, I love Phama, I love Amy. So much
love in this place it sounds like fucken paradise! I love all that stuff! Ek kan nie worry oor daai kak nie, my man. I just want to show you. This thing here [the binoculars] works. (231–32)

It is significant that the binoculars are initially used to illustrate the cacophony of competing claims of political allegiance in the city, the irony of these expressions of love and hate and the simultaneous negation of any threat of violence or real affection behind them—these slogans are merely a backdrop to prove that the binoculars work, as well as a contextual backdrop to the politics of this fictional representation of South Africa in transition. They reveal the “wallpaper” decorating the city, as Treppie would phrase it. Neither Lambert nor Sonnyboy are interested in the actual slogans. Lambert remains unconvinced that he should accept the binoculars:

“What can I do with it, the binoculars now? I’m not a spy!”
“Well,” says Sonnyboy, “you can show your girl the city. From high places.” (232)

Sonnyboy’s answer implies that the binoculars will enable Lambert to assert himself as a subject in the city, to look on others (rather than be gawked at, as he has just been by the AWB recruiters) and to impress a girl. That this “thing here” works, acts to potentially empower Lambert—not as a spy, but as an inhabitant of the city, who can claim his space in it, who can stake a claim to high places, to a disembodied viewpoint which allows him one means of escaping his grotesque body.

Despite declaring to Sonnyboy that he’s not a spy, Lambert has previously spied on his neighbor’s party and the women across the road. He is a voyeur who is obsessed with scenes of intimacy, scenes which are foreign and unimaginable to him. Thus he spies on the neighbors drunkenly caressing each other in their skimpy swimsuits (106) and the lesbians across the road engaging in scenes of intimacy involving fruit salad (188-93). Both acts, as Van Niekerk describes them, are excessive and humorous. Yet Lambert also desires them; he experiences these acts voyeuristically, as spying on others engaged in acts of sexual intimacy is the only way he can begin to comprehend them. As Van Der Merwe argues, Lambert’s spying is a sign of his longing for a life that he cannot have. Nevertheless his actions, his “surreptitious gaze,” simultaneously affirm his separateness, his sense of isolation from social interaction and his otherness. The affronted neighbor’s response is grounded in the logic of the apartheid scopic regime and taxonomy: “Come here, you waste of white skin who peeps at us when we braai!” (110)

After acquiring the binoculars, Lambert becomes a kind of “Urban angel” (271), patrolling the streets at night with his binoculars and gun—both acquired from Sonnyboy: “It’s just him, Lambert, who knows where to look. Only he sees everything there is to be seen. ‘Cause he’s a
patrolman” (280). The binoculars thus provide Lambert with a false sense of power and an inflated sense of his own perceptive skills. As De Kock has argued, Lambert is precisely incapable of seeing “everything there is to be seen” and of understanding or deciphering anything that he does see. Treppie subsequently recruits Lambert to use the binoculars to spy on the inhabitants of the police flats, thus inverting the conventional subject-object relation. As Van Der Merwe explains, spying presents the potential for fun and also escape for the Benades; spying on the police in particular provides the means for survival in a life filled with clashes with the police. The binoculars enable them to construct their own narrative, to be both spectators and directors: “Now the flats look like lots of little square movies, all running at the same time on a big screen” (286). However, Treppie is drunk and at his most morose, and Lambert, stricken, attempts to cheer up Treppie. Treppie remains inconsolable and after reciting a series of incoherent mythical narratives and folk tales describing the moon as seen through the lens, he concludes:

Maybe it’s rubbish, Lambert, but who’s going to open your eyes for you? Fuck those binoculars of yours, man, fuck them! It’s all in the mind. And what’s in a name? … Anything you say. Triomf or Doris Day, we’re here to stay! (289)

It is on the basis of statements such as these that Burger compares Treppie to a Dionysian monster (“Also sprach Treppie” 4). Treppie allows no room for sentimentalism or euphemisms. The only reality for him, as I have mentioned, is the material, anatomical reality that is incapable of dissimulation. As Burger argues, for Treppie it is only “kak” that transcends description, that is inescapably “what it is” (“Also sprach Treppie”). Treppie is a tragic Puck figure who experiences life as hostile and meaningless:

As if you’re not exposed enough as it is, with your soft human skin and its holes for seeing and smelling and tasting and farting—that’s if you’re lucky enough to still do all those things. And with your two little legs and their forward-facing feet, and with your hands each with their five little twigs. Always trying to grab onto things in the void here in front of you. (315)

And yet, he remains the erstwhile trickster figure who recognizes the importance of occasionally hiding this reality, because “What the eye doesn’t see, the heart can’t grieve for” (454) and telling stories in order to “give the people what they want”: “And then Treppie would say he couldn’t help it, that’s what the people, meaning them [the Benades], wanted from him. A story for every occasion” (466). Giving the people what they want remains a sardonic move.
Opening your eyes in this case has nothing to do with the visual, with the hyperbolic vision supposedly allowed by binoculars. This is the kind of sight that, although not as cynically as Treppie, Van Niekerk invokes—she encourages readers to look beyond surfaces, generalizations, and myths. Van Niekerk makes a clear distinction in the novel between simply looking at and understanding what one sees. Thus, the bodies of the Benades are not merely “on display” as exhibits, but the intention is that by displaying these “hidden” bodies, the reader will gain a degree of understanding about them. It is imperative to engage with them, as they are “here to stay” and will not be brushed aside in response to any call for political correctness in post-apartheid South Africa.

PEEPHOLES

I have alluded to Lambert’s “peeping” through walls and fences, voyeuristically and longingly. At other points in the narrative, several of the protagonists spy on each other, or hide things, fearing discovery, fearing being watched. I now wish to extend the analysis of the metaphor of the peephole to determine whether there is a sense in which it may foster empathy, or rather express the desire for empathy, even though “peeping” remains “surreptitious,” to use Schmidt’s phrase. I will focus on two incidents to shed light on this, both of which occur on Guy Fawkes Day, 1993, when Lambert has an epileptic fit after instructing the family to set fire to their possessions.

Pop awakens from a dream of a dog’s heaven to witness the fiery destruction of his belongings in a scene more suited to one of the circles of hell than heaven. In a tragic distortion of his dream, Pop is reduced to crawling on all fours. From this inverted vantage point, Pop’s field of vision is limited to the lower strata of his family’s bodies. The lower half of Mol’s body is now revealed to the reader in all its exhausted poignancy:

Now he sees Mol’s legs. She’s full of bruises and grazes and her brown socks have sagged down to her ankles. Pop looks up Mol’s legs. The hollows of her knees are full of knobbly, purple veins. Above the hollows, the skin puffs up in bulges, and further up it hangs in folds. Pop’s looking up into Mol’s depths. He lets his head drop again. (238)

This encounter could be termed the apex of abjection and Pop turns his head away in shame and embarrassment. Mol’s body is neither an object of desire for the penetrative male gaze, nor is it the chaste maternal body of the mythical volksmoeder (mother of the Afrikaner people). The incontrovertible evidence of the trauma wrought by years of hardship, poverty, and sexual abuse
“Give the People What They Want” is inscribed on Mol’s grotesque body and finally rendered visible to Pop. As Treppie suggests above, bodily orifices can act as peepholes—potentially facilitating exposure. Pop peeps “into Mol’s depths” and her body reveals the pain she is incapable of articulating. It appears that for the first time, as a result of witnessing her body from this invasive angle, Pop is forced to acknowledge the extent of Mol’s private suffering and to reckon with the full horror of their family history.

At several points in the novel, the protagonists express the desire to see the world through another’s perspective or from another’s point of view. Mol believes that “Treppie can see right into her head” (434), but Treppie’s foresight stems from a desire to mock and torment, rather than to empathize. Conversely, Mol refers to Pop’s eyes as “Old elephant eyes” and she longingly proclaims her desire to “peep through a hole in Pop’s head so she can watch with him” (195). This is an expressed wish for empathy, attained through an embodied experience, through literally seeing what the other sees, and thus hopefully feeling what the other feels. Although impossible for Mol, the reader is granted this privileged position in the chapters in which Pop is the focalizer.

At the conclusion of the disastrous events on Guy Fawkes Day, Mol once again expresses a similar desire. She is in the bath with Pop, cradling his head in her arms, in a brief moment of real intimacy—divorced from cheap thrills or the incestuous acts which began in the bath tubs of their youth. It is a moment grounded in mutuality and understanding:

She takes Pop’s head in her arms. She wants to look into his face so he can see her smile. When she smiles, he always smiles back at her. But Pop’s neck is stiff. She can’t turn it. All she can see is the one side of his face, from an angle above him.

Elephant eye! Looking out from a hole, a faraway dark place, with an old wrinkled eyelid that half covers the eye. And the wrinkles underneath, down and across, from so much looking out. And tears! But not elephant tears. Human tears! … She joins in, nothing to be done, she’ll maar cry with him a little. (266–67)

The meticulous description of Pop’s frail and exhausted skin and his eyelid evokes pathos. Mol is incapable of seeing what Pop sees, her attempts at empathy have been thwarted, and yet when there is “nothing to be done” she cries with him, thus sharing his pain and providing them both with a brief feeling of solace and comfort.  

“TO SEE ANOTHER PERSON’S FACE”

Thus far I have examined two kinds of visual encounters using the motif of binoculars and peepholes. In the remainder of the paper I will examine whether intimate encounters with the
bodies of others, beyond the realm of the family, have the potential to accord the protagonists a kind of comfort and understanding. I explore whether these moments of looking at others could potentially constitute visual interactions based on mutuality.

The Benades are an insular family and very rarely stray from their house at 127 Martha Street or engage with other members of the public. Treppie does have a part-time job at a Chinese-owned shop, although very little information is known about his activities there. When the Benades do go out as a family unit, it is usually to shop. On the one occasion they eat in a restaurant, the Spur, Pop has to admit, as he “looks at his people. They don’t look so good under the Spur’s stairway lights … Ag, what the hell. They are what they are” (85).

Their relations with their neighbors are strained and yet, subsequent to the drama on Guy Fawkes, Mol’s response is to seek comfort in other people:

But Mol wants a cigarette, one of those the man’s offering over the wall. She wants to see another person’s face. She wants to touch another person’s hand. If someone wants to give her a cigarette, who’s she to say no? Some people still care when you’re suffering. That’s what Mol’s thinking. Pop knows. Shame. Poor Mol. (242)

The neighbor’s offer is not prompted by compassion, but rather mockery. (“Anyone for a smoke? After action, satisfaction?” [241] he says, quoting a cigarette advert). Pop knows this, but in her desperation for some kind of solace and intimacy, Mol takes up her neighbor’s offer. She desires to “see another person’s face… to touch another person’s hand.” As a member of a family of neighborhood pariahs, Mol wishes to briefly feel as if she is part of a larger community. Mol’s need to connect with someone outside her family is mediated by the body; for her, the existence of enduring tenderness and compassion will be proved via sensual connection—seeing and touching (not talking).

The neighbors’ responses remain steeped in voyeurism and disdain:

[Pop] sees how the Fort Knox women look over the wall at Mol from both sides of the Fort Knox man. They’re looking at how she lights her cigarette, but they’re also looking her up and down. Her body and her legs. Their faces look like they want to say: Sies. But they’re also curious. Like the faces of people looking at an old tortoise or reptile or something eating its food in the zoo. Eating food or shitting. Or shitting off. ‘Cause now the Benades have taken another big blow and everyone’s staring at them, as if they’re the only people who have setbacks like this. (242)
Their stares of horror and curiosity are explicit and overt, yet Mol is oblivious of their meaning, in her desperation for some form of neighborly contact. Pop, watching from the sidelines, witnesses and understands the meaning of their looks. The simile used implies that the Benades are considered akin to animals, incapable of thought or emotion. Perhaps the reader’s thoughts might initially mimic those of the Fort Knox women. Yet the final sentence in the quote above affirms the reality of the Benades’ emotional and affective lives; it encourages sympathy if not empathy.

Despite his seeming cynicism and world-weariness in the scene above, Pop has also expressed the longing to be viewed as an equal, embraced as a friend. On a particularly hopeful day, he drives into Braamfontein and parks his car in order to stroll through the city streets: “He doesn’t know what he’s looking for. He’s not looking for anything. He just wants to feel the rush of people around his shoulders; he wants to look at their faces” (70). His interactions are all positive—he exchanges good wishes with a beggar and enjoys being part of the camaraderie of the black men standing in the Ithuba scratch card line. The woman behind the counter explains the process to him and he subsequently wins 75 rand: “The black woman first has to explain to him where to scratch. She smiles a big smile at him. Never in Triomf has he seen a black woman smile at him like this” (72). In a situation devoid of hierarchy or political interference, Pop for the first time exchanges pleasantries across the racial boundary. He is considered an equal to the other men in the queue, all hoping for a change in fortune.

There is one other similar moment of reciprocal interaction in the novel. In one of their few ventures beyond the confines of Triomf, the Benades head to Braamfontein for a furniture sale. However, they are caught up in a peace march, mistaken for ardent supporters of the Mass Democratic Movement, on the basis of their Volkswagen’s number plate which begins with the letters MDM. The Benades are quick to feel terror and judge the crowd as threatening, on the basis of its demographic make-up of mostly black people, referred to in derogatory terms by the Benades. Lambert shouts, “Stay together!” (300), but they are quickly dispersed in the crowd. Mol’s experience in the crowd is worth recounting in its entirety:

Then a young meid with a Chicken-Licken cap on her head came over and said: “Peace be with you, Ma,” and she smiled at Mol and pinned a light-blue ribbon onto her housecoat, with two doves on a bright blue pin, one white and the other light-blue. Then only did she see what was going on—everyone was wearing ribbons and doves and holding hands—so that was the story! And all this time the young meid kept squeezing her hand and smiling at her with shining eyes. She smelt like Chicken Licken and her hand was a bit greasy. But then she squeezed the hand back, even though she’d never touched a black hand before, clean or dirty. On the other side of her was
an outa with only one leg, leaning on crutches. He stuck one of his crutches under his arm and then he shook her hand. That hand was cold and the skin was loose. And the bones felt like they had come apart.

She saw the outa had no blue on, so she worked her hands loose to give him her own ribbon … And then she smiled at him, and she saw the young meid smile as well, and then all three of them were smiling much better, and they all took each other’s hands again.

Suddenly everything went so quiet you could hear a pin drop. All around her people began to cry … Next to her, the young meid was sniffing. The next thing, that meid picked up her hand, with Mol’s hand still in it, and she used it to wipe her nose. Mol thought, ja, it’s hard to believe, but if that young meid had rubbed her snot off on the back of Mol’s own hand, she would wragtag not have minded. There was such a nice feeling in the air that she almost started crying herself. (300–01, my emphasis)

The peace parade affords another example of an authentic intersubjective “looking experience.” It is the only moment in the novel when the Benades appear to be wholeheartedly accepted into and embraced by a crowd of people. It could be argued that the depiction of the march is somewhat romanticized or contrived, but considering the grotesque depictions of the rest of the novel, in comparison, it does not seem out of place—in fact it is a necessary balance. Furthermore, the marchers themselves are not described sentimentally at all—they have greasy hands, snotty noses, and are emaciated—and yet there is an intimacy implied in this closeness. The Benades, in this instance, do not “shrink from contact with strangers … [from] touch[ing] one another or feel[ing] that close to the stink of someone else’s life” (Raban 12). Furthermore, the march seems to encourage a mutual, reciprocal relation of looking. Importantly, Mol has never been in such close physical proximity to a black person, her perceptions of black people were based on stereotypes, narratives of racial inequality, and political dogma. The experience of holding hands with others, of mirroring the smile of another, and having her smile mirrored back at her affords her a sense of shared purpose and understanding that mere voyeurism would not provide. The encounter with the body of the other enables her to feel empathy, to feel, for the first time in her life, a sense of community—the kind she has longed for and that has thus far been denied her. Her empathy and desire to cry in response to and with the young woman whose hand she is holding recalls her instinctive response to Pop’s tears in the bath tub.

This parade marks a kind of turning point in the domestic relations of the Benades. Treppie is speechless for the first time and once he recovers, suggests a family picnic. During the picnic he writes a poem titled “This is not wallpaper,” which ends with the phrase “at last there is peace”
The euphoria of the march clings to the family, and Treppie subsequently refrains from sexually harassing Mol again. Seeing others smile and cry, holding hands and collapsing the distance between two people has facilitated a real understanding—ephemeral, and dissolved at the march’s conclusion, but nonetheless groundbreaking.

**WHAT WAS PAST WAS PAST**

*Triomf* concludes on Guy Fawkes Day in 1994. Pop is “accidentally” killed by Lambert when Lambert discovers the truth of his incestuous origin. As a result of his enraged confrontation with Treppie, Lambert is wheelchair-bound, his one leg has been amputated and Treppie’s fingers are broken. Mol, too, was injured when Lambert stabbed her. The Benades’ psychic wounds and disfigurement are visible to all now. Nonetheless, the Benades, too, have, in their own way, embraced the new era in South African history: “The most important thing was that they should never again [use racist pejoratives].... What was past was past, [Treppie] said, and it applied to them too” (471-72). The fantasy of an escape has also been crushed, “North no more” (474). Pop’s ashes are buried in the backyard, atop of which a rose bush is in bloom, and watermelon shoots have started to grow amidst the rubble of Sophiatown.

The Benades have been shorn of any myths or wallpaper; the only reality is that which is experienced through their broken bodies, rooted in their anatomy. It is, as a result of this transformation and as a consequence of Van Niekerk’s virtuoso writing, that we do feel sympathy for the Benades. Burger concludes,

> [Treppie wil die] murpapier aftrek en die individue, elke Benade, raaksien, nie veralgemenings nie. Uiteindelik is dit ook wat met die leser gebeur. Die leser leer nie armblankes in Triomf ken nie, maar vir Treppie, Pop, Mol en Lambert. (“Also sprach Treppie” 14)10

By remaining in that house, by staking a claim to the land, the Benades force the reader to consider the meaning of belonging in South Africa and the ethics of engaging with and empathizing with others. The novel’s conclusion re-situates the context of the Benades—we have moved from the mythical to the everyday; the Benades are no longer abject symbols, but merely a family of broken, wounded individuals, bumbling along as best they can. Although the final scene evokes pathos, Van Niekerk leaves no room for over-sentimentalizing the Benades: Treppie still looks like a devil with his broken, crooked fingers (473).
CONCLUSION

Referring to the opening scene of Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Restless Supermarket*, Bethlehem states, “The tawdriness of this scene is entirely congruent with the sensationalism of much post-apartheid fiction where the body stalks in exhibitionist display,” and then refers to *Triomf* as illustrative of this, with its narrative that “foreground[s] … rape and incest” (80). In this paper I have attempted to show that Van Niekerk’s novel cannot be dismissed as merely exhibitionist or sensationalist in its admittedly often grotesque depictions of the body. While it is true that the body has arisen as a privileged trope in much of post-apartheid fiction, I have explored the potential ethical relevance of this in *Triomf* in particular, with a specific focus on the visual field. I have suggested that Van Niekerk inquires whether looking at the other could potentially facilitate empathy and understanding or whether this remains merely an act of voyeurism. In this regard, I examined the meaning of the motif of binoculars and peepholes in *Triomf* and argued that the Benades’ thwarted desire for connection and empathy is enacted through the visual medium. The reader, too, acts as literary voyeur, yet in this manner begins to care for and empathize with the Benades. In conclusion, Van Niekerk’s visceral corporeal descriptions represent an ethical intervention and an attempt to explore the formation of intimate relationships which, for Van Niekerk, are always mediated by the body. Van Niekerk does expose fault lines in the Afrikaner nationalist narrative, but she also exposes and challenges normative familial and cultural narrative histories. Critics who have commented on the grotesque and explicit physical imagery in *Triomf* may have read this in isolation from the rest of the text and Van Niekerk’s broader intentions. This oversight detracts from an understanding of the importance of visceral anatomical descriptions and, by implication, diminishes the transgressive and ethical impact of her fiction.

In Van Niekerk’s writing (and that of other postcolonial writers), as evinced by the Benades’ grotesque bodies, the “borderlines of the body are the metonymical marks of power relations in a colonial and postcolonial society” (Veit-Wild 107). These power relations are dictated by socio-economic circumstances, as well as violent historical and political forces. The power relations are written on the body. When these bodies are seen and acknowledged, they reflect the impact of years of violence, abuse, poverty, as well as a disfiguring Afrikaner nationalist narrative. It is only through empathy and merciful interactions with each other that the Benades can attempt to alter the stereotypes they encourage or the first impression they make.

In his epistolary novel, *Be My Knife*, David Grossman’s protagonist Yair ponders the meaning of empathy and intimacy:
I thought we would look into each other’s eyes, and slowly bring our eyes closer, closer and closer, and even closer, until my eyes touched hers—not the lashes, really touched—the eyelids, the eye itself, the pupils and moistures would touch. Tears will immediately come, of course, that’s how the body works. But we will not give up or surrender to the rules of reflex, to the body’s bureaucracy; until we rise, out of the tears and pain into the fragments of the vaguest, most ancient pictures of our two souls and float into our bodies. We will see the broken forms in each other. This is what I want, right now. That we will see the darkness in each other. Why not? Why compromise, Miriam? Why not, for once in our lives, ask to cry with the other’s tears? (132)

Yair’s idea of eyes touching eyes, in an extreme form of “looking at the other,” is of course mere fantasy, and yet at the heart of his desire remains a very real emotional longing for empathy—in its most authentic form. The protagonists of Triomf experience all too brief moments in which looking at each other’s bodies facilitates empathy. In two different incidents, Mol expresses the desire to cry with another’s tears. Perhaps, in the absence of touch or conversation, a kind of mutual looking relation can suffice to engender empathy and intimacy.

It seems fitting to conclude with Michiel Heyns’s thoughts on the state of South African literature:

It would seem, then, that the problem for the white South African writer is how to find a perspective on South Africa that is not merely abject … Essential as it has been to “come to terms” with (the) past, the challenge for literature, as for the rest of non-literary South Africa, will be to erect habitable structures on the foundation of remorse. (qtd. in Van Niekerk, “Klein vingeroefening rondom die nosie van hibriditeit”)

In my paper I have attempted to show that this is the challenge Marlene van Niekerk has embraced. Perhaps learning to cry with another’s tears would be something akin to building new structures on the basis of remorse, as a way to move beyond the merely abject, and I believe that this is what Van Niekerk does in Triomf. If the reader is moved to feel some degree of empathy for these often extremely unsympathetic protagonists and to perhaps even shed a tear with them (tears of pain in addition to tears of laughter) then it seems there is a foundation for contemplating mutual remorse and for understanding one another on the basis of something other than a bodily image encoded in apartheid logic.
NOTES

1. See Brophy for a discussion of *Triomf* as a “psychological allegory … of the crisis of Afrikaner nationalism” (96). Shear argues that *Triomf*’s depiction of a tipping point in the history of the Afrikaner can be considered Gothic. He employs Derrida’s idea of “hauntology” to suggest that the Benades are haunted by the specters of apartheid mythology and their “haunted house” represents the “haunted nation” of South Africa on the verge of a new era.

2. “A modern variant of the Ampie history; the representation of the poor Afrikaners” (own translation).

3. I will suggest that, to some extent, the initial horrified reception *Some Afrikaners* received in some quarters is mirrored in the reception *Triomf* received in those same constituencies. Both these texts, albeit in different ways and forms, challenge the mythology of “the Afrikaner” and depict the bodies of those Afrikaners that were previously hidden from public view, or consigned to the sidelines of history.

4. Van Niekerk, has in fact admitted that her decision to write in this brutish and callous style was a direct reaction to critics who accused her of adopting an overly-philosophical and elevated style in her previous texts: “And so I decided to write about the most complex things in the most crass language imaginable, and I wrote *Triomf*” (qtd. in L’Ange).

5. Van Niekerk used this phrase in the context of a paper titled “Writing in Times of Transformation,” delivered at the IDASA/ Afrikaner Skrywersgilde conference in 1990. This phrase appears to be an oxymoron—and this is, arguably, the main thrust of Van Niekerk’s paper—which flies in the face of various prescriptive “programmes” or proposals dictating the kind of writing that should be created in a “new” South Africa. The “closure” Van Niekerk rejects is anything that limits or foreshortens creative and poetic possibilities; if indeed such a limit is needed, then the only kind of limit she can accept is one which in fact is not a limit—which proposes that there be no limits:

   Of course we need closures in order to live. Words are closures. But abstract, generalizing concepts are “worse” closures, and when they are wielded by the powerful or those ascending to power, they are the worst. What I want is to protect the notion of a “creative closure,” a “fertile boundary.” To protect this is to demand that “Puck” must always be welcome to hover in the wings of political organizations as theaters of power. (3)

6. See Shear for a discussion of the transgressive import of the grotesque in the trope of the colonial Gothic and of Lambert as a “novel’s locus of monstrosity” (84).

7. Lambert has told Sonnyboy about “his girl,” although in reality she will be a prostitute whom Treppie and Pop will pay to entertain Lambert on his 40th birthday, which coincides with the country’s first democratic election. Lambert has fantasies that this girl will fall in love with him and stay with the family.

   In preparation for the girl’s arrival, Lambert attempts to alter his physique and thus re-invents himself:

   As for himself … Nou ja, that’s something he doesn’t even want to think about. There’s so much about himself that he’d like to fix up: his hair, his fat belly, his backside. He needs some clothes, and some underpants so his dick won’t hang out of his shorts all the time…. If only things would work.

   Cars, fridges, the lawnmower. If everything was nice and tidy; if all the rubbish got cleared up; then,
he schemes, maybe his girl will want to come back again. (207)

Lambert wishes to conceal the features which mark his body as grotesque. He wishes to heal his wounded body, to make it “work” in order to be considered “a decent man” by “his girl.” Thus her approval would ensure that his transformation is complete. In other words, being viewed as a complete person, as a unified, decent man by another could replace or erase his current grotesque body-image.

8. On his way to the dump Lambert was called over by two recruiters for the right-wing AWB organization. As a result of his appearance, his declared allegiance to the National Party, and his strange style of expressing himself, he is mocked and harassed by the recruiters:

“Leave the rubbish alone, man,” says Du Pisane. “We’re wasting our time with him, he’s just a piece of rubbish, man.” (220)

9. The possibility of crying with someone is also alluded to after a particularly violent confrontation between Pop and Treppie. Pop, enraged by Treppie’s ranting, punches him and knocks him out. Immediately contrite and exhausted, Pop drags Treppie to his room:

when Pop took hold of Treppie under the arms and dragged him away to his room, Pop was folded over double from crying. His tears were dripping onto Treppie’s face, so it looked like Treppie was also crying as he lay there, lights-out. (458)

However, in this instance, Treppie’s tears are illusory rather than actual tears of empathy.

10. “Treppie wants to pull off the wallpaper and reveal the individual, so that each Benade can be seen rather than generalizations. This is, in the end, what the reader experiences. The reader does not learn about, or get to know, poor whites in Triomf, but gets to know Treppie, Pop, Mol, and Lambert” (own translation).

11. For example, the ideological narrative of Afrikaner election is challenged in a corporeal manner. Towards the novel’s conclusion, Mol remarks of her own body: “Just look what God’s Providence had wrought over time, creasing the wattles on her throat, weighing down her old gut and cracking the soles of her old feet—being one of the chosen had worn her out good and proper!” (457). It seems the pervasive myth of Afrikaner nationalism has a causal role in the trauma and decrepitude wrought on Mol’s body. Thus the myth of election is exposed and debunked in an embodied form—or expressed differently, the physical evidence disproves the myth.

12. Heyns is the translator of Van Niekerk’s monumental second novel, Agaat. This quote was used as an epigraph to Van Niekerk’s “Klein vingeroefening rondom die nosie van hibriditeit.”
Buxbaum
“Give the People What They Want”

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