

Constructing Reality: The Ways of Seeing in Ali Smith's *How to Be Both*

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Abstract

How to Be Both by Ali Smith, which centres around the concept of art and reality to a great extent, is an experimental novel that invites the reader to think through dualities, including life and death, artwork and human; and, significantly, from the perspectives of eyes and camera. Divided into two sections, the novel includes two stories which are decade-apart. One of them focuses on the life of the 15th-century artist Francesco del Cossa, and the other is reflected through the point of view of George, a young girl from the contemporary period, dealing with the loss of her mother, as she recalls some precious moments she shared with her. The different plots merge when George and her mother go to see the paintings of Cossa. By foregrounding the two kinds of perception, Smith's novel signifies the art critic John Berger's theory of perspective, indicated in his BBC series-based book *Ways of Seeing*. According to Berger's cultural theory, the human eye, like a painting on the wall, can only be in one place at a time. Yet, the camera takes its visible world with it as it moves, and through the camera we can see things which are not in front of us; it is freed from the boundaries of time and space. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the significance of gaze while interpreting relative reality in Smith's novel by employing Berger's cultural and artistic theory.

Keywords: *reality, art, perspective, culture, form*

One of the most productive contemporary British authors, Ali Smith, has been steering the late 20th and the early 21st century literary tradition with her multiple award-winning novels, which focus on themes such as reality and art, employing the technique of intertextuality for the most part. Through witty language, containing references to canonical literary figures such as William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens, and to various artworks, Smith foregrounds the sentimental and humane aspects of today's realm which is invaded by technological advancement, radicalization, and post-truth discourse annihilating the trust, ethics, and hopes of humanity. Furthermore,

Ali Smith's fiction demands of its reader some basic requirements. Firstly, one must be the bearer of a sense of humour, and, if possible, a sense of the ludicrous, for we are everywhere treated to a stream of in-jokes and puns that reflect their author's fondness for both whimsy and

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surreality. Secondly, one must give up any reliance on the conventions of narrative realism for though her works are often explicitly set in recognisably contemporary worlds, they rarely limit themselves to the visible parameters of social reality, preferring audacious imaginative flight over intricate description or plot trajectory (Lea 2019: 396).

Instead of withering away in the tumultuous and retrograding facts of the contemporary world, Ali Smith's fiction, as well as her nonfiction, is set in the boundaries of imagination and reality; orderly and disorderly; visible and invisible; dead and alive. In addition to her narrative style and basic themes, Smith's protagonists embody this dualism; moreover, they reflect the pluralism which is inherent in the human nature. The polyphonic element in her works problematizes "the possibility of objective knowledge" (Liebermann 2019: 137) while relocating the self as elusive "because of the limited means it has to express itself" (Lea 2019: 402). Though Smith's inspiration is derived from the various break points concerning reality and narratology, and seems to be emphasizing the modes of departure, her aim is to demonstrate how the self can connect with both animate and inanimate objects; different perspectives; incomprehensible facts of life like death and the afterlife; periods and places unknown to him/herself.

As Lea interpreted, the entire corpus of the British authoress – including her first short story collection, *Free Love and Other Stories*, the 2001 novel *Hotel World*, her most renowned book of short stories, *Public Library and Other Stories*, the genre-bending novel *How to Be Both*, and the Booker-shortlisted work *Autumn* – reflects Smith's concern about the balance of the two sides of a bifurcation consisting of two opposing worldviews or diverging ways of existence, like the ghost narrator who was actually a 15th-century artist and the fictional protagonist who lives in today's world in *How to Be Both*. In other words, Smith always encourages the reader to embrace the factor of 'butness' throughout her writing. For example, we may choose to dissociate ourselves from the people who think, believe, and exist differently, but we may also come to terms with the thought of living together regardless of opinions, beliefs, race, gender, and age. Likewise, we may believe that life is designated merely by what is visible to us, but it is also possible to take into account the fact that the reality we sense is also made up of invisible forms – our beloved ones who passed away, the philosophers, artists, and writers who no longer live but continue to enlighten us – and the realms we construct cannot be palpable.

As one of the main characters in her 2011 novel *There But For The* comments: 'the thing I particularly like about the word "but" [...] is that it always takes you off to the side, and where it takes you is always interesting' (Smith, 2012a: 175). Being taken off to the side, detoured, disoriented, or derailed are adventures to which the reader of Smith must get accustomed, for her style, though often directly personal in its address, is characterised by a quirky roundaboutness that demands a continuous openness to others' ways of seeing the world (Lea 2017: 26).

From among all of Ali Smith's novels and short stories, the act of seeing the world from the perspectives of others, as Lea indicated, is the most evident element in *How to Be Both*. As Smith herself admitted in one of her interviews about the fictional work,

a picture of one of del Cossa's frescoes in an art magazine triggers the main idea of this novel: 'A fresco is a work built in a wall – so much so that if you take it off the wall you have taken a part of the wall of. When the famous frescoes in Florence were damaged by flooding in the 1960s, the restorers found underneath the originals designs that were sometimes different. It struck me as extraordinary that we can be looking at a surface and think we can see everything but actually there's something below it – and we can't see it' (Bilge 2019: 115).

In the same vein with the artist's artwork, which embodies both the surface and the depth in one piece, *How to Be Both* holds layers that problematize the borders of sight. In the novel, the types of gaze stand out both in the structure of the plot and in the personal traits of the main characters.

The 2014 Costa Book-awarded novel *How to Be Both* by Ali Smith, as argued above, invites the reader to think about certain dualities constructing the sense of reality an individual lives in. These dualities centre around life and death; artwork and human; and, significantly, eyes and camera. Divided into two sections, the novel includes two stories which are decade-apart, but interrelated. One of these stories focuses on a real person who is fictionalized within the frame of the novel. The 15th-century painter Francesco del Cossa, who lived in Ferrara at that time, tells the story of *her* art and gender in the chapter named 'eyes', and appears as a ghost in the other chapter, which is set in the contemporary period. The contemporary section, titled 'camera', is constructed around the perspective of a young girl named George, who loses her mother and recalls the memories about her throughout

her whole narrative. These two quite different stories and perspectives are merged in the scene where George and her mother go to see the paintings of del Cossa. The two stories, in two chapters, as 'eyes' and 'camera', are open to be read both as eyes preceding the camera and as camera preceding the eyes. Structured "like the double helix of DNA... double and yet single; finite but infinite; the same but different" (Lea 2017: 63), the novel, as implied by the titles of the chapters, intrinsically "celebrates sight as the pinnacle of human sense because it allows the characters to experience and understand the world around them" (Calinescu nd: 1).

By foregrounding two kinds of perception, one of which is the most primitive way of seeing – eyes – and the other is technologically the most elaborate form of the same act – camera –, Smith's novel may also be the subject of the gaze and perspective theories. Among what has been said and written about the types of seeing, the London-based art critic and novelist John Berger's compilation work, *Ways of Seeing*, in which he criticized the ideologies behind the Western aesthetics, has evolved as one of the most prominent guides about perspective as visual culture developed in years. Published in 1972 as a proceeding project following the BBC TV series of the same name, the collection of essays demonstrates

how paintings can be understood and interpreted through their socio-historical context – the place and time within which they were created and with reference to the life of the author or artist. Using specific pictorial examples by such famous artists as Dutch Golden Age painter Frans Hals or German Renaissance artist Hans Holbein the Younger, Berger suggests that what we see is always influenced by a multitude of assumptions we hold about such things as beauty, form, class, taste, and gender. Berger asks the reader to consider and even confront these assumptions, and take them into account when interpreting works of art. Another of Berger's argument is that aesthetics based on the consideration of "beautifully made objects" are of no value because ways of looking at art have been utterly changed by the development of mechanical means of producing and reproducing images (Lang and Kalkanis 2017: 11).

While mentioning the new mechanical ways of looking which provide the observer with the production and reproduction of images, John Berger alludes to the camera perspective that he explains in detail later. According to the critic, the human eye, like a painting on the wall, can

only be in one place at a time. Yet, the horizons of a camera comprise a much wider space since it takes its visible world with it as it moves. Besides, through the camera, the spectator can see things which are not in front of him/her and which are freed from the boundaries of time and space. Along with its function of ensuring timelessness and placelessness to the object in the frames, the camera reproduces the images of the paintings, multiplying its possible meanings (Berger 1972: 19). Developed to criticize the visual arts that have undergone transformation with the invention of the camera, this theory sheds light on the path Ali Smith created in *How to Be Both* due to the novel's strong emphasis on sight. Ali Smith creates the novel both in form and in content through the co-existing dualities to indicate the shaping processes of reality that are dependent on how an individual perceives the world around him/her.

In the two-part novel, the chapter named 'eyes' demonstrates the reality layer of the fictionalized artist Francesco del Cossa, whose identity is reversed by Smith into a woman by the name of Francescho. In *How to Be Both*, Francescho is a character who has to dress as a man for the purpose of pursuing her career in painting and keep creating frescoes without being restrained by gender bias. During her life or in her death - a state in which she still exists within the fictional realm as a ghost -, Francescho's perspective of the world gets along with Berger's depiction of the camera perspective. She does not look at her surroundings only through her eyes - that naturally see solely what is in front of them. Instead, the perspective of del Cossa, as illustrated by Ali Smith, senses the unseen, the everlasting core of things as a painter whose sense of reality is enhanced by his/her ability of imagination. As she says at the beginning of her chapter,

It is a feeling thing, to be a painter of things: cause every thing, even an imagined or gone thing or creature or person has essence (Smith 2015: 55).

For Francescho del Cossa, whether alive or dead, a creature or a person, ever existing or once-existed thing is within the concept of reality she lives in. The reality - a notion taking shape through what and how we see - is a thing freed from the boundaries of time and space for her philosophy of life, as long as there is an essence in a thing which partakes in - or once partook in - life. On that account, Francescho has more of the sight of a camera than the sight of an eye since the camera

captures multiple images at the same time and transgresses the conception of now and here by going across places and times, for instance, transmitting the moment of a couple that kissed in New York when World War II ended to the viewer who sees that photo in the London of the 21st century. Similar to that photograph, Francescho travels through time and space, appearing in the realm of George. With reference to the ideas of John Berger, due to the camera, Francescho, like a painting from old times, travels to the spectator in the modern world (1972: 20). In other words, Francescho del Cossa is equalized with her artwork, which is not a photograph but a painting, by functioning – like her piece of art – as an entity existing across times and places in the face of reality. By portraying the artist,

Smith affirms an understanding of context that is diachronic – not limited to a synchronic “slice of time” but instead aligned “with the dynamics of endurance and transformation that accompany the passage of time” (Dimock 1061). Operating within a wider context, the artwork becomes a co-actor as past histories linger in the present moment (Lewis 2019: 133).

Together with the artwork and functioning as co-actor, as Lewis said, the artist, Francescho del Cossa, travels temporally and spatially in Ali Smith’s fiction. In addition to her timeless and placeless perspective, her sight over the products of her artifice is parallel with the camera, as well. She says,

A picture is most times just a picture: but sometimes a picture is more: I looked at the faces in torch-light and I saw they were escapees: they’d broken free from me and from the wall that had made and held them and even from themselves (Smith 2015: 164).

The images, when she looks at them, are not stable like those in the eye, which is strictly bound by the limitations of the body. They escape from their current reality and journey through different realities, an act which offers them new meanings – as a camera provides – by reproducing the images, multiplying their meanings in each new context they are seen. Yet, when looking from a broad perspective, her reality is attached to the eyesight, too. By employing the gaze of a camera while looking at life, which means that – in her case – she does not restrict herself with the normative viewpoint of her society, that tells her she cannot practice art because of her gender, del Cossa creates eyes through each of her

paintings. The artworks of del Cossa, which function as eyes since they look at their spectators as well, are everlasting and hold a variety of meanings as time goes by. As asserted, “[t]hese factors mean that looking is never a simple, uncompromised act; rather the look operates within a complex matrix of visual... relations” (Weaver, 2018: 530).

The other chapter, titled ‘camera’, takes the timeline of the story from the Renaissance to the 21st-century London, with a teenage girl named George, who is in search of the past and reviews the moments she spent with her mother to come to terms with the latter’s unforeseen death. George’s struggle to bear the fact of death and understand the worldview of her mother, who left quite a precious legacy to her daughter about the hidden ways of looking at existence, essentiate her character development. As interpreted,

Book-smart but naïve about relationships, George sifts through memories of her mother and observations about her father and younger brother, and questions about the story she’d assumed they’d created together. Smith masterfully conveys the profound dislocation of bereavement: How can it be that there’s an advert on TV with dancing bananas unpeeling themselves in it and teabags doing a dance, and her mother will never see that advert? How can the world be this vulgar? How can that advert exist and her mother not exist in the world? (Meacham 2015: 31).

While coping with such essential interrogations about life, the young girl comes to an impasse due to her narrow point of view; to put it differently, to having the sight of an eye. In Bergerian terms, living in a digital age that welcomes post-truth discourse – “circuitous slippage between facts or alternative facts, knowledge, opinion, belief, and truth” (Biesecker 2018: 329) -, George could not comprehend the mentality behind the camera perspective that is, in a way, the creation of her period. Even though “[t]he camera... demonstrated that there was no centre” (Berger 1972: 18), George still makes use of fixed focalization when trying to understand life. Instead of contributing to her worldview, the cumulation of evolving technology takes George away from the ability of looking through other perspectives and leads her to a kind of blindness or, more accurately, to the one-angled perspective that an eye has. As George’s therapist, Mrs Rock, says about the condition of the age,

The mysterious nature of some things was accepted then, much more taken for granted... But now we live in a time and in a culture when mystery tends to mean something more answerable, it means a crime novel, a thriller, a drama on TV, usually one where we'll probably find out (Smith 2015: 347).

As a result of this process of dissipation of mystery with every digital tool unveiling the answers about it, George, as most of the people in her generation, develops a one-sided reality and does not contemplate enigmas such as time, space, death, life, and art. She lacks the sight of her mother, who sees through every detail of the painting, which reveals del Cossa's gender when she visits the museum with George and recalls everything so clearly, as disclosed through George's thoughts:

How does she even remember seeing all these things, George thinks. I saw the same room, the exact same room as she did, we were both standing in the very same place, and I didn't see any of it (Smith 2015: 396).

The mother acts as a camera to George's eyes. According to Berger's theory, she is the artist and George is the painting on the wall. The mother sees the core of things, as del Cossa does, instead of focusing only on the surface of images. Her reality is beyond here and now.

Do things just go away? her mother says. Do things that happened not exist, or stop existing, just because we can't see them happening in front of us? They do when they're over, George says (Smith 2015: 387).

While George sees only here and now, her mother sees the past, the present, and the future, as well as here and there. Along with the overarching point of view her mother bequeathed George through her words, her death introduces her daughter to new emotions and new ways of looking so as to cope with pain.

[M]ourning is represented by Smith not as an unbreachable singularity but as an experience of both-ness. It involves a condition of being simultaneously emotionally dead and alive; in pain and yet numb; beyond meaning and yet immersed in it; stuck in the past and present but seemingly without a future; empty and yet full of the past of the lost. Moreover, death is an opportunity for transformation, for becoming something more than the limits of the self (Lea 2017: 66).

By witnessing death at one point in her life, George becomes obliged to double the angle of her sight, one of which will be towards the past – her mother – and the other will look across the future. Though at the beginning of this chapter, George’s eyesight foregrounds the realm she senses, in the sequel, her process of lament over her mother’s death through memories provides George’s eyesight with a new layer of understanding, making her perspective similar to that of a camera.

To conclude, *How to Be Both* by Ali Smith, when analysed against John Berger’s theory in the series *Ways of Seeing*, evokes the urge to question reality as comprehended by its beholder. While the ‘eyes’ chapter focuses on the question of how an artist sees the world, the ‘camera’ chapter reflects the developing point of view of a teenage girl who thinks that reality only belongs to the existing people, yet tries to understand other possibilities. In both cases, the two kinds of sight generate each other. In the chapter named ‘eyes’, del Cossa’s camera-like perspective, or her strong understanding of life, leads her to create eyes in the form of paintings; in one of them she exists as a spirit observing the 21st century. In the ‘camera’ chapter, a young girl whose reality is, or was, determined merely by the things in front of her, evolves from eye-sight to camera-sight. George begins to develop her character by remembering the past – a period which keeps her mother visible and alive – and by trying to understand the reality her mother senses.

By placing side by side the different ways of seeing that Berger set forth, Smith frees the concept of reality from the present time and from being only the property of living beings. Objects, artworks in this case, and the dead are as real as the present / the alive. Moreover, as Smith indicates in her nonfictional work *Artful*, “[t]here’ll always be a dialogue, an argument, between aesthetic form and reality, between form and content, between seminality, art, fruitfulness and life” (2014: 69). Reality, an issue that Ali Smith touches upon in most of her works, is also represented in a very similar manner in one of her latest novels, *Winter*. Here, Smith points out that Johannes Kepler, who studied the relation between time and truth, believed them to be kindred. After explaining this, Smith makes an analogy for reality construction through snow crystals and the snowflake as, “... snowflake can also mean the thing that happens when two or more snow crystals fall together and create one structure all together” (2018: 96-97). Like the composition of reality with many layers across time and space, the

snowflake is created through the union of numerous crystals. In other words, and in keeping with Kepler, truth – or reality – is inherent in the perspective of the spectator and related to time by being the overall product of multiple periods. Or simply, reality is timeless since it does not belong to a specific period of time. By indicating the object and the subject, the past and the present, the living and the dead, Smith essentially shows that reality is more complex and comprehensive than we think.

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