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## **The Scopic Drive and Scopophilia in John Updike's *Roger's Version***

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**Abstract:** John Updike's *Roger's Version* (1986) explores the scopic drive and dwells on the scopophilic instincts of its protagonist and narrator Roger Lambert, a doctor of divinity and a devotee of Karl Barth. When the young computer whiz Dale Kohler approaches Roger for a grant for a project intended to objectify God on the computer through his vast knowledge of Computer Science, the latter, though skeptical of the efficacy of the project, keeps his hopes on tenterhooks because he is cocksure of the failure of the venture of Dale whom he takes to be a sort of contestant. Roger resorts to a series of wild phantasizings in which he imagines a possible liaison between Dale and his wife Esther, and offers us photographic snaps of the putative erotic encounters between them. The novel also involves Roger's visits to his nubile niece Verna with whom he gets entangled in an incestuous liaison, and the sight of whom stimulates and precipitates his scopophilia. With his training as a painter and a cartoonist, Updike in this novel makes pervasive use of the scopic. Exploring the theoretical notions of scopophilia, this paper attempts to explore the operation of the scopic drive in *Roger's Version* and its concomitant scopophilia engendered by it in its protagonist Roger.

Keywords: Updike, scopic, scopophilia, gaze, Roger, Dale, Esther, Verna

**“Updike pays homage to the visual artist's ‘submission’ to the physical stimuli of the world far more than most writers”.**

**-Joyce Carol Oates**

**(“Updike's American Comedies”)**

**“Pictures speak where words fail”.- Updike (*More Matters* 769)**

If in “The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood” Updike refers to his obsession with the “three great secret things”, sex, religion and art, it is the pursuit of sexual pleasure that characterizes most of his protagonists. In the same memoir Updike hinted at the correlation between painting and writing:

He saw art — between drawing and writing he made no distinction — as a method of riding a thin pencil line out of Shillington, out of time altogether, into an infinity of unseen and even unborn hearts.

(*Assorted Prose* 185).

It is this correlation between painting and writing that is fundamental to my claim: Updike, with his penchant for painting, had depicted the sexual encounters of his characters with a vivid, bold raunchiness, exploring the rhetoric of visualization. Since his childhood Updike was engaged in drawing. His acquaintance with the *New Yorker* chiseled his early flair for painting modelled on some of its cartoonist. His exposure to Reading Museum in Shillington and to the Museum of Modern Art in New York whetted his penchant for painting. After receiving a Knox Fellowship, Updike opted for art, and was attached to the Ruskin School of Fine Art in Oxford, England. In his “Introduction: An Oil on Canvas” from *Still Looking: Essays on American Art* Updike referred to an old oil painting by Alice W. Davis purchased by his mother. This painting with a view of Massachusetts Bay was present in his guest house since 1933, and to Updike it represented “our family’s most conspicuous gesture toward the visual art”(xi) in general and his mother’s “good taste” for art in particular(xii). Updike, with his awareness of motion pictures, recognized that “[a]fter touch, the visual is the supreme erotic sense, and there is no keeping sex marginal in a motion picture”(Odd Jobs 41). Updike’s penchant for the visual may also be attested by the following lines from his poem “Camera”:

Let me gaze, gaze forever  
into that single, vaguely violet eye:  
my fingertips dilate  
the veiled pupiled circumscribed  
by crescent leaves of metal  
overlapping, fine as foil, and oiled.

(*Collected Poems* 48)

While his explicit presentation of sex operates largely on the visual axis, some of his protagonists are obsessed with scopophilia which constitutes the desire of deriving sexual pleasure through the very act of visualization. In this paper I wish to examine how Updike makes pervasive use of the scopic drive<sup>1</sup> and how the instinct of scopophilia and its

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<sup>1</sup> Updike’s preoccupation with the scopic drive may also be found in such novels as *The Centaur* and *Seek My Face*. Updike’s engaging interest in Art and the scopic may also be found in almost all the essays subsumed under “Visible Matter”(641-666), “Photos”(667-702), and “Art”(703-756) in *More Matter*; and in the essays within “Art” in *Due Considerations*.

concomitant visual pleasure characterizes the protagonist in Updike's *Roger's Version* (1986), his second installment of "The Scarlet Letter Trilogy"<sup>2</sup>.

Critics and reviewers have ranged widely from each other in their readings of *Roger's Version*. Fredrick Crews<sup>3</sup> tries to equate the characters of *Roger's Version* with *The Scarlet Letter*. Crews further thinks that *Roger's Version* may be called Updike's *Heart of Darkness* in that Roger Lambert's filthy journeys through the shabby, slums to meet Verna can be equated with Marlow's journey across the Congo to get a glimpse of the darker aspects of humanity. Crews also argues that Updike's "has radically divorced his notion of Christian theology from that of Christian ethics" (7). Judie Newman in her book *John Updike* observes that Updike's *Roger's Version* can be subsumed under the "dualistic worlds of mind and flesh" (149). The computer language employed by Updike in the novel may be, according to Newman, equated with the formal patterns comprising the structure of the book. It was Raymond J. Wilson III who in his illuminating article "*Roger's Version: Updike's Negative Solid Model of The Scarlet Letter*" pointed out the "reversal strategy" employed by Updike. But the point of intertextuality has been overlooked by Wilson who rather feels that Updike was influenced by Barthes's *S/Z*. Another critic who explores Barthes and applies it to Updike's *Roger's Version* is John N. Duvall who, in his excellent article "The Pleasure of Textual/Sexual Wrestling: Pornography and Heresy in *Roger's Version*", largely draws upon Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*. While these critics and reviewers have dwelled on the ramified aspects of this dense and rich novel, none of them actually hinted at the scopic dimension of the novel which involves varied ramifications of gaze. It was none other than James Schiff who in his famous thesis *Updike's Version: Rewriting The Scarlet Letter* (1992) most pertinently suggested that seen from Roger Chillingworth's perspective, *The Scarlet Letter* "is a discourse on visualization" (54) and that this may also be extended to Updike's *Roger's Version*:

Hawthorne's interest in visualization is not lost upon Updike, who appropriates the function of seeing as his central metaphor in *Roger's Version*... (56).

Taking my cue from Schiff, my humble submission in this paper is that the central metaphor of seeing operating in this novel may be traced to scopophilia, the overwhelming desire to look at, and its resultant visual pleasure embodied in Roger Lambert, a professor at a theological school.

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<sup>2</sup> Updike's "The Scarlet Letter Trilogy" comprises *A Month of Sundays* (1975), *Roger's Version* (1986), and *S.* (1988).

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Crews, "Mr Updike's Planet". Review of *Roger's Version* by John Updike. In *New York Book of Reviews*, (December 4, 1986): 7-14.

## II

While broadly speaking scopophilia constitutes one's love for seeing, David W. Allen in his book *The Fear of Looking, or Scopophilic-Exhibitionistic Conflicts* (1974) refers to the definition of scopophilia derived from Webster's Dictionary: a "desire to look at sexually stimulating scenes specially for actual sexual participation that constitutes a partial or component instinct often sublimated (as in a desire for learning)" (Quoted in Hawthorn, 310). Laura Mulvey in her seminal article "Visual Pleasure and narrative Cinema" (1975) argues:

[o]riginally in his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones. At this point he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a subjective and curious gaze (16).

Suffice it to say, it is the act of visualization— precipitating in the ramified versions of gaze— that triggers off scopophilia or the sexual stimulation derived from the pleasure in looking. As Freud puts it: "Visual impression remains the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused" (*Three Essays on Sexuality* 22). Freud further argues that both in scopophilia and exhibitionism the eye serves as an erotogenic zone:

The eye is perhaps the zone most remote from the sexual object, but it is the one which, in the situation of wooing an object, is liable to be the most frequently stimulated by particular quality of excitation whose cause, when it occurs in a sexual object, we describe as beauty[....] This stimulation is on the one hand already accompanied by pleasure, while on the other hand it leads to an increase of sexual excitement or produces it if it is not yet present. (*Three Essays on Sexuality* 75)

While for Freud scopophilia leads to libidinal excitation, Lacan relates it to the human desire to see more and more. Significantly while both voyeurism and scopophilia veer around the scopophilic with sexual stimulation as the end-product, there is a fundamental difference between the two. Whereas voyeurism is an essentially clandestine and covert act, scopophilia is an overt act. In the words of Richard Allen<sup>4</sup>, "Scopophilia describes a pleasure derived from looking. Voyeurism can be distinguished from scopophilia on the grounds that pleasure of the voyeur is derived from looking at a person who is unaware of the voyeur's presence...." (130).

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<sup>4</sup> See Richard Allen, "Psychoanalytic Film Theory", in Toby Miller and Robert Stam, eds. *A Companion to Film Theory*. (Blackwell, 1999), 123-145.

According to *Psychiatric Dictionary* (Hinsie and Campbell, 1960) scopophilia is “[s]exual pleasure derived from .*contemplation or looking*. It is a component instinct and stands in the same relation to exhibitionism as sadism does to masochism”( David Allen 1)(Emphasis added). The word “contemplation” assumes enormous significance in the context of novel, inasmuch as the scopophilic instinct in the protagonist Roger Lambert in this novel is stimulated both by looking and by contemplation. In fact every sexual act is preceded by the act of looking. As Robert Creeley puts it in his “Foreword” to *Scopophilia: The Love of Looking*: Adam and Eve first “see” their nakedness in the Garden of Eden and it becomes the burden of self-consciousness ever after. Just as they saw themselves, we see others, with that insistent presence of the sexual in any recognition of those ones, whoever they are, of there, apart from ourselves” (Malanga 6). The photographer Marsha Burns argues that “the sensual, or perhaps erotic, pleasure derived from viewing a photograph of a nude can be amplified by the sense of the relationship between the subject and the photographer” (Malanga 14). This comment may be attested in this novel by the fact that Roger already has a deep relationship with the two women who stimulate his scopophilic drive: while Esther is his second wife, Verna is the daughter of his half-sister Verna. The photographer and critic John Baldessari opines that “pictures are a way of confirming how you remember a person or else of correcting what you falsely remember”, and maintains that it is “the voyeuristic fantasy” that closes this gap (Malanga 9). In Roger’s case, however, this fantasy is essentially scopophilic, inasmuch as both the objects of his pleasure— his wife Esther and his niece Verna— are very much aware of being under his scopophilic gaze.

### III

Updike’s manifesto of this novel may be found in his “Special Message” to the Franklin Library edition of this novel:

The information content of this novel had to be high; the debates between Roger and Dale are meant to be real debates, on issues that are, to me, live and interesting. And the book as a whole, in its novelistic life as an assembly of images, concerns information itself: the intersection of systems of erudition, and the strain of the demands that modern man makes upon his own brain (*Odd Jobs* 857)

Interestingly, Updike himself expressed misgivings as to the “commercial success” of this novel which has been couched “in the form of debates”, in his interview with Jean-Pierre Salgas (Plath 180). “I have been accused of writing novels without ideas”, Updike commented to Katherine Stephen in an interview, and added “so I would write a book with a few ideas in it”

in the same interview (Plath 187). Commenting on the moral debates and ideas of the novel, Marshall Boswell<sup>5</sup> rightly points out how the novel wonderfully conflates “the erotic and the theological”(Cambridge Companion 54). And yet, *Roger’s Version* does not turn out to be a sort of Shavian version of novel of ideas, *mutatis mutandis*, but an aesthetically rich and successful novel, the author’s skepticism notwithstanding. Hailed by Adam Begley as Udike’s “ambitious, formidably intelligent novel”(408), Updike adds the fourth dimension to his famous three great secret things<sup>6</sup>: science. Begley reports that Updike consulted Michael Dertouzos, the Director of MIT’s Laboratory to cull necessary information about Computer Science, and that Dertouzos “took a keen interest in the idea of a computer whiz trying to catch a glimpse of God courtesy of binary code and graphic interface”(418-419). Updike was supposed to have read a few articles from such journals as *Sky and Telescope* and *Scientific America* to keep himself abreast of the basic knowledge of Computer Science. His college classmate, Jacob Neusner, the Director of the Program in Judaic Studies at Brown University, helped him understand Tertullian philosophy(Begley 419).

If in her article “John Updike’s Sense of Wonder” Ann Beattie suggested that “Updike trusts the visuals” (11), the same preoccupation with the visual may be exhaustively found in *Roger’s Version*. Updike explores the scopic drive through Roger who takes “an innocent pride in the keenness of my eyesight”(17), and describes with a punctilious attention almost everything around him: the detailed physiognomy of the computer engineer Dale Kohler(3-4); the felicitous description of smoking a pipe(6); the scenic depiction of the surroundings behind Roger’s window beside the University Chemical Research Annex(11); the graphic delineation of clouds(11); the assiduous description of the supermarket near Sumner Boulevard(52-53); the reference to “a praying Jesus” in Roger’s great aunt Wilma’s house(92), to adduce only a few examples. Roger’s scophylic instinct overtakes him, and he derives a vicarious pleasure, as it were both by appropriating the gaze of others, and by casting his wide ken on others. His pleasure in casting stolen glimpses toward his wife Esther, for instance, titillates him:

I glimpsed my wife, her thin petite figure... from the living room across the hall to the dining room.

Secret glimpses, innocuous as this is, of life proceeding unaware of my watching have always excited me... Esther, spied upon unawares, looked

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<sup>5</sup> See Marshall Boswell, “Updike, religion, and the novel of moral debate”. In Stacey Olster, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike*. (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 43-57.

<sup>6</sup> The uninformed readers may go through Udike’s memoir “The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood” in *Assorted Prose*(Knopf, 1979), 151-187. It is in this memoir that Updike refers to his preoccupation with the three great secret things: sex, art, and religion.

like some prey --- someone to sneak up on and rape, another man's precious wife to defile, as a message to him, scrawled in semen. (33-34)

But apart from this temporary titillation, these scenes buttress the engaging scopophilic instinct of Roger serving to satisfy his libidinal drives vicariously through the alternative equivalence of visual speculation. As Marshall Boswell rightly points out:

Although the scenes that Roger imagines between Dale and Esther represent the most explicit visual and tactile descriptions of sexual coupling in Updike's exceptionally lurid *oeuvre*, they are not offered merely to titillate....Roger's sham claim of clairvoyance in the service of pornographic satisfaction, then, adroitly parodies Updike's Barthian insistence that the search for "proof" of God's existence is not only fruitless but also taboo(*Cambridge Companion*, 54-55).

One may be tempted to find a literary precedence of Roger's sexual imaginings in the phantasies of Miles Coverdale in *The Blithedale Romance* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the novelist who looms over Updikean consciousness, or even in the voyeuristic spying of Thomas Marshfield on Alicia's sexual encounters with Ned in *A Month of Sundays*. Like Miles Coverdale's phantasizing on the nudity of the exotically beautiful Zenobia, Roger phantasizes on the putative nudity of his wife Esther having a liaison with Dale. Roger may be seen as a prototype of such people who, according to Freud<sup>7</sup>, like people seeking sexual satisfaction in reality, "are content merely to *imagine* that satisfaction, who need no real object at all, but can replace it by their phantasies"( *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* 347). Freud also considers it to be one of the forms of neurosis:

Other forms of the neurosis, the brooding kinds, to an excessive sexualization of actions which ordinarily have their place as preliminaries on the path to normal sexual satisfaction--- an excessive sexualization of wanting to look or to touch or to explore(350-351).

Updike's scopophilic preoccupation, along with its scopic drive may also be attested by a host of words and phrases with which the novel bristles: 'see', 'blinking', 'looking', 'watching', 'witnessing', 'peeking', 'eyesight', 'gaze', 'read', 'glancing', 'staring', 'image', 'painting', 'computer screen', 'visual', 'light', 'glint', 'glimpses', 'spied upon', 'pictured', 'grimaced', 'smirked', 'glaze', 'scowl', 'view', etc. Updike extends the metaphor of the scopic to Dale Kohler who comes to Roger for a grant to carry out his research: to objectify God on the computer screen. "God's face is staring right out at us", claims Dale (22), and hence engages

himself in a debate with Roger that “God might be a fact”(22). Suffice it to say, the very idea of objectifying God hinges on the scopophilic, conceived of in scientific parameters in Dale’s specific case. Interestingly, in his “Message” to the Franklin Library edition of the novel, Updike admitted of having seen “on the screen a curious face like configuration that sparked into sudden being and then slowly faded out”( *Odd Jobs* 856). Dale’s penchant for the gnomic language of the computer may be traced to what Updike had said to Katherine Stephen in an interview:

I was sitting at my processor one day, and I noticed this scramble of numbers that it throws up. The notion of there being a magical secret in that code of numbers occurred to me, being a superstition sort of person”. (Plath 187)

In this context we may also refer to what Updike remarked at the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Laboratory for Computer Science in Cambridge on October 26, 1988: “[In] computer graphics a visual simulacrum of the world can be conjured onto a screen and experimented upon”( *Odd Jobs* 817).

“In a novel largely concerned with visualization”, argues James Schiff, “Dale is determined literally to see which is unseeable, to shine a light on that which has no understandable physical essence” (“Updike’s *Scarlet Letter* Trilogy” 267). Although Roger strongly detests the idea of Dale’s proposal to objectify God on the computer screen, instead of a blatant refusal, he keeps his hopes on receiving the grant on tenterhooks simply because he wants to relish the failure of Dale with sadistic delight. Roger has another personal equation behind offering Dale the grant: that Dale happens to be a friend of Verna, the daughter of Roger’s half-sister Edna. Learning from Dale that Verna lives in the slum area of the same city, Roger nibbles at the earliest opportunity of seducing his nubile niece. Roger’s scopophilic instinct does not fail to notice the intimate female anatomy of her niece Verna engaged in her maternal care rendered towards her baby-daughter Paula : “In bending over to this maternal exertion, Verna had loosened her bathrobe and an entire breast had swung suddenly, luminously free”(65). Roger’s subsequent meetings with Verna are characterized by the same scopophilic drive. Even his pre-marital illicit encounters with his second wife Esther induced in him a scopophilic pleasure akin to tasting a dainty dish:

My second wife when unmarried had been a flexible marble in bed, her underparts in sunlight of our illicit afternoons *fed to my eyes like tidbits of rosy marzipan*. (Emphasis added) (57)



Roger's punctilious depiction of Esther's physical anatomy, carried out in raunchy details testifies to his scopophilic obsession. Jeff H. Campbell in his acute analysis of Roger's character most cogently argues: In this case, Roger is not only the subjective I who tells the story; he is also the voyeuristic eye who sees and reports the adulterous activities of Esther and Dale and at times the omniscient eye who sees into Dale's very consciousness"(260). Similarly William H. Pritchard's keen observation that Roger is "endowed with a rather extraordinary X-ray vision" seems amply-justified( 216).

The scopic drive in this novel bordering on scopophilia also involves the appropriation of the gaze of others. On certain occasions Roger appropriates the vision of Dale — for example, he claims that he "was seeing with Dale's still-religious eyes"(55) — and into a series of erotic phantasizings concerning the putative illicit liaison and carnal carnival between Dale and Esther. Similarly later Roger "saw through his (Dale's) eyes"(96) how his wife Esther was poised spiffily, as it were, to receive the erotic advances of Dale. It irks Roger to notice how Dale answered after a pause, his eyes sliding toward my wife"(103). Having appropriated the gaze of Dale, here Roger finds a strange transmission of his scopophilic drive from him to his young contestant, Dale. Even when Roger tries to appropriate Dale's gaze, Updike explores the scopic field in terms of colour effects: "I was seeing her(Esther), while not forgetting Verna at my side, through Dale's eyes: the effect was of sudden living color, of a tuning adjustment of the UHF channel"(125) Phantasizing on the conjectural liaison between Dale and Verna, Roger reflects: "I could not imagine two young people of the opposite sex locked in the same room and not copulating, or at least laying hands on each other's sensitive places"(89).

The all-pervading lens of Roger's scrutinizing gaze combines the immediate present with the projected fantasy. After his meeting with Dale, Roger imagines: "Perhaps Dale is not heading home but is going to visit my disreputable niece, Verna, in the prisonlike project where she and her eighteen-month-daughter live"(31). Reflecting on his premarital liaison with his second wife Esther, Roger describes how "[s]he looked up at me,... and there was a glaze: a big-eyed white fish had swum up close to the green aquarium glass and let escape a flash of her furious tedium at going round and round in this tank every day"(37-38). Roger's engaging gaze of Esther gradually accentuates into a strong scopophilic drive:

I watched, enjoying my favorite view of her, the rear view: erect small head, taut round butt, flicking ankles. It had not changed since I would longingly observe her swishing away from me down to the church aisle after choir practice, shaking the dust of my church from her feet. (39)

During his initial interactions with Esther, Roger's "gaze was fixed on Esther's pursed aggrieved little lips, tensed to unleash the next argumentative utterance"(44). If in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* Roger Chillingworth's suspicious and scrutinizing gaze closely follows Dimmesdale each and every activity, here the jealous Roger "was seeing with Dale's still-religious eyes" to trace a possible liaison between Dale and Esther(55).

The scopic drive operates throughout the novel, and this is manifested not only through voyeurism and scopophilia, but also through the meeting, colliding and coalescence of gaze. During Roger's first visit to Verna, he "could feel eyes looking at me through the tiny peephole" of her door (60). Similarly Roger noticed that Verna's "eyes looked lashless and had a curious slant. She stared at me for a long glazed second, and then quite disarmingly smiled"(60). In Roger's scopophilic "field of vision beyond the stitched glove tips lay her blurred white legs"(64). When Verna hung her head, Roger "could look past her loose lapel at nearly the full curve of her young breast, its silken weight and faint blue veins"(72).

**CONCLUSION:** If *A Month of Sundays* may be hailed as a discourse on the ritualization of adultery, *Roger's Version* offers a visualization of adultery both through his own camera lens, and particularly through the lens of Roger Lambert's wild phantasizings. Fantasy, for Freud, is an alternative means of fulfilling one's unfulfilled desires in a distorted way, and since Roger in his past middle-age could not gratify his libido to satiety, he seeks the alternative path to fantasy. Furthermore, his wistful appropriation of the gaze of the much younger Dale, at once exhilarates, rejuvenates and stimulates him, inasmuch as he finds, as it were, a vicarious pleasure or what he calls "a sexual stir" by sharing Dale's field of vision(126). In his favourite way of adding footnotes to some of his novels, Updike claims that the best sex is what he calls "head sex", i.e., the sex conjured up in one's vivid phantasies(190). Updike's exploration of the scopic drive in *Roger's Version* broadly veers around and operates through the scopophilic instinct of Roger, and involves multiple strategies like coalescence, collision, and appropriation of the varied forms of gaze of various characters. Finally, if *A Month of Sundays* and *S. Roger's Version* Updike casts a wider net to conflate the visual, the sexual, the theological, the philosophical and the technological into a rich orchestration.

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