Looks of Love and Loathing: Cultural Models of Vision and Emotion in Ancient Greek Culture

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My aim in the following paper is to look at the role of the eyes in Greek ways of thinking about love and envy, specifically in the light of the relation of these cultural models to wider folk and scientific models of vision in ancient Greek culture. The question to be considered is what difference the typical Greek belief that vision is a material, « haptic » process (analogous to touch) makes to models of emotion which lay great stress on the role of the eyes.

Love is an emotion (or perhaps a syndrome of emotions and emotional states) in which, for us as for ancient Greeks, the degree of intimacy is typically correlated with increased eye-contact. Envy, on the other hand, is regularly constructed in terms of one’s being the unwanted focus of others’ visual attention. We are all familiar with role of the eyes in modern accounts, both scientific and popular, of these emotions. In broad terms,

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2. The BBC Science website (http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/hottopics/love/flirting.shtml, accessed 29 April 2008) contains the following information: « New York psychologist, Professor Arthur Aron [SUNY Stony Brook], has been studying the dynamics of what happens when people fall in love. He has shown that the simple act of staring into each other’s eyes has a powerful impact. He asked two complete strangers to reveal to each other intimate details about their lives. This carried on for an hour and a half. The two strangers were then made to stare into each others [sic] eyes without talking for four minutes. Afterwards many of his couples confessed to feeling deeply attracted to their
the role of the eyes in Greek scenarios of love follows this familiar pattern. Danaus (for example) warns his daughters at Aeschylus, Suppliants 1003-1005 how the gaze of the lover seeks to enchant its object:

καὶ παρθένον χαλαζίαν εύμόρφος ἐπὶ
πᾶς τις παρελθὼν ὃμματος θελκτήμον
τόξευμ' ἔπεμψεν ἵμέρον νικώμενος.

At the luxuriant beauty of maidens
every passer-by shoots an arrow of enchantment
from his eye, overcome by desire.

In a great number of such passages, the eye of the lover is certainly an active force; but its focus is typically the eyes of the beloved, and it is the beloved’s eyes that typically exert the attractive pull on the lover in the first place. A good example is Ibycus 287.1-4 PMG (F):

Ἐρως αὐτὲ μὲ κυανέοισιν ὕπὸ
βλεφάροις ταχέω ὃμμα δερικόμενος
κυλήμασι παντοδαποῖς ἐς ἀπειρο-ρα θύεται Κύριοιδος ἐσβάλλει.

Once again Love, with melting glances from under his dark eyelids,
entices me with all kinds of enchantments into the vast hunting nets of Aphrodite.

The glance of personified god of Love stands for irresistible effect of a beloved’s eyes on the lover. Once a mutual relationship is established,
The eyes are also emblematic of envy, but envy is not as interactive as love: typically, for the Greeks as for us, it involves a malicious stare from a distance. Its hateful look is the chief characteristic of the personified figure of Envy from Hesiod (C8-7BC) to Gregory Nazianzenus (C4AD). It is an envious look from afar that is the focus of the fears of Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, a great victor tempted by his wife into excessive display of his success, as he walks to his death on the crimson cloths that she has spread before him. Agamemnon knows that it is an ambivalent thing to be the centre of others’ visual attention — some look with admiration, but others with resentment, begrudging his success. This is why Pindar, a poet whose job it is to celebrate the height of agonistic male achievement by displaying the victor’s success, frequently contrasts the positive regard the victor should receive with the gaze of the malicious and envious, of the phthoneros who « rolls an empty thought in darkness ». In the Greek physiognomic and iconographic traditions the phthoneros can be recognized by his frown, his staring, open, sunken eyes, and other signs such as his pale, wasted complexion.

mutual looking and eye-contact follow: ἐνθυτείς γάρ παρὰ τοῦ ἀντιφιλόντος ἥδείμα μὲν αἱ ἀντιβλέψεις — « For immediately from the one who loves you back come counter-glances that are sweet ».

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6. Xenophon, Hiero 1.35, Sophocles, fr. 474 Radt; Euripides, Iphigeneia at Aulis 584-586; Plato, Phaedrus 255ce; Plutarch, Quaestiones convivales 5. 7, 681BC; Chariton 1. 1. 6. ; Xenophon of Ephesus, 1. 3. 1; Achilles Tatius, 1. 9. 4; Heliodorus, 3. 5. 5.
7. See Hesiod, Works and Days 195-6, Gregory Nazianzenus, Epigram 8. 121. 5, PG 38. 25. For envy expressed in the eyes cf. (e.g.) Euripides, fr. 403 Kannicht (Io: ἐν χείροιν ἢ σπάλλειν ουκ ἢ παρ᾽ ὄμματι, « in the hands, the guts, or the eye »); cf. Suda, s.v. ὀφθαλμίσις.
8. Aeschylus, Agamemnon 946-947 (καὶ τοῖοὶ μ᾽ ἐμβηκένον ὀλονυγήσαν θεῶν | μῆ τις πρόσοθεν ὄμμασα βάλοι φόνος, « And as I tread on these tapestries let no eye’s envy strike me from afar ».)
9. Pindar, Nemean 4. 39-41 (φόνονερά δ᾽ ἄλλοις ἀνήρ βλέπων | γνώμην γενεών σκότῳ κυλίνδει | χαμάκι πετοῦσαν, « With an envious look another man rolls an empty thought in darkness that falls uselessly to the ground »; Pythian, 8. 71-72 (θεῶν δ᾽ ὅποιον ἄφθονον αἰτέω, Ξέναρχες, ὑμέτερας τύχας, « I pray that the gods’eye be free of envy with regard to your fortunes »).
10. See Katherine Dumbabin and Matthew Dickie, « Invida rumpuntur pectora: The Iconography of Phthonos/Invidia in Graeco-Roman Art », Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum 26, 1983, p. 7-37. For the face of the phthoneros, cf. Lucian Calumnia, 5 (cf. Plutarch, Quaestiones convivales 5. 7, 681D); Adamantius, 1. 12 (i. 324 Foerster), 1. 21 (i. 344 Foerster); [Polemo] 75 (i. 428 Foerster); Anonymous Latinus, 86 (ii. 116 Foerster).
The question is, how might these familiar scenarios be affected by popular and quasi-scientific beliefs in vision as a material process. At both levels, ancient Greek optical theories are typically materialist in conception, in that they presuppose some form of physical contact between the eyes and the object of vision\(^\text{11}\). The active (emissionist) theory, that the eyes see by means of the fiery rays which they cast on the external world, is the common one in early poetry\(^\text{12}\); it is apparent also in the notion that the sun is an all-seeing eye\(^\text{13}\), and finds expression in some scientific optical theories (e.g. those of Alcmaeon of Croton and of Euclid)\(^\text{14}\). Fire within the eyes also figures in the optical theory of Empedocles\(^\text{15}\), where it co-exists with a belief that the eyes receive physical emanations from objects; for Aristotle, this indicated that Empedocles followed an interactionist theory (in which the eye emits rays which then merge with emissions from the objects of vision) of the sort that appears in Plato’s *Timaeus*\(^\text{16}\); but recent interpreters place more emphasis on the eye’s reception of emanations\(^\text{17}\). The theories of the Stoics, on the other hand, seem more clearly interactionist


\(^{13}\) For the sun as an eye which looks with rays see (e.g.) *Homer* 31. 9-11; *Hymn to Demeter* 70, Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 606 etc.; cf. Ludolf Malten, *Die Sprache des menschlichen Antlizes im frühen Griechentum*, Berlin, 1961, p. 39-45; Charles Mugler, *La lumière et la vision dans la poésie grecque*, *Revue des Études Grecques* 73, 1960, p. 40-73, at p. 63, p. 66-69. For the Sun as a model for the human eye, see Pindar, *Paean* 9, fr. 52K: 1-2 Snell-Maehler (*Ἀχτίς ἀκλίου, τί πολύσχοτε μήσει, ἵ ω μάτερ ὀμάτων, ς μνας πται ὡμοιως τημόρφη ἠτίμιον ἡτίμιον τρωγχίνα, « the eye that imitates the sun’s disc »).

\(^{14}\) Alcmaeon of Croton A 5 DK; Euclid, *Optics*, introd. axioms 1-7. On the continuity between poetic and scientific models of vision, see Charles Mugler, *La Lumière*, *op. cit.*

\(^{15}\) See Empedocles A 86, B 84 DK; cf. B 89, 109a DK.

\(^{16}\) Plato, *Timaeus* 45bd (cf. *Theaetetus* 156ab); Aristotle, *De sensu et sensibilibus* 2, 437b10-438a5, esp. 437b24-25, 438a4.

vision involves a flow of *pneuma* from the *hégemonikon* to the eyes, whereupon a « cone » of stretched air is formed between the eyes and the object through which contact is effected and information transmitted back to the *hégemonikon*. There are also passive, emanationist views, such as the view of Democritus and the other atomists that the eye is the passive recipient of impressions created by « images » (*deikela*, *eidôla*) derived from the objects of sight. The apparent exception to the dominant view of vision as involving physical contact between perceiver and perceived is Aristotle, who decisively rejects the materialist theories of his predecessors. In his view, perception in all its forms is a qualitative change in the subject, involving reception of the form but not the matter of the object. None the less, his theory retains a notion that the object of vision, in so far as it is coloured, effects a qualitative but still physical change, both in the transparent medium between object and perceiver and in the eye itself — our perception is of the shape of the apple and its redness, not of the apple itself, but there is still a material change both in the air that is the medium of perception and the eye that receives it, a change caused by the qualities of the apple. This is suggested above all by an example not of vision (of the eye’s undergoing a qualitative change) but of a converse process, the eye’s causing a qualitative change. I refer here to Aristotle’s acceptance and explanation of the belief that the eye of a menstruating woman can cause discoloration of a mirror: this happens because the change in the transparent medium of the eye (believed to result from menstruation) affects that of the air and the mirror. The change in the transparent medium is qualitative (i.e. colour), but still material. Thus even Aristotle’s passive and anti-materialist theory of vision can retain an active role for the eye in causing physical changes in the world (albeit not as an aspect of its activity of seeing).

These folk and scientific models are important because in their different ways they are compatible with beliefs that the eyes may cause or lay one open to a variety of profound and often unwelcome physical changes. Such, for example, is the belief that diseases such as eye-infections and epilepsy, and physical-cum-spiritual afflictions such as miasma (pollution) may be transmitted by sight. But they are also relevant to our scenarios for the expression of emotions of love and envy. In the case of love, the active (emissionist) theory makes its presence felt in frequent references to the fire, rays, or arrows which emanate from the eyes of the beloved. This sense that the gaze of the beloved can make him (or her) an active party to the interaction can be accentuated by imagery which presents the beloved as « hunting » the lover by means of the arrows or snares of his eyes. Typically, however, the beloved is not (or not yet) an active party to the relationship; his burning, melting looks incite desire, but do not express it, and indeed they incite desire whether the beloved is actively seeking to ensnare the lover, modestly resisting his advances (οὐ με κακῶν πόθος, ἀλλ’ ἄπερμουν ἵστροφον αἰσχύνη βλέμμα κατημαθάσας — « It’s not desire for wickedness, but the pure glance of modesty that has burnt me to cinders »), or entirely unaware of or indifferent to the lover’s intentions, as in Pindar fr. 123. 2-6, 10-12 Snell-Maehler:

τάς δὲ Θεοξένου ἀκτίνας πρὸς ὅσιον
μαμμάριοσίας δρακεῖς


23. Sophocles, Oedipus Tyrannus 1384-1385 (pollution), 1424-1429 (pollution); Euripides, Hippolytus 1437-1438 (« deadly exhalations threaten the eye of the goddess Artemis »), Heracles, 1153-1162 (shame and pollution); Orestes 512-515 (cf. 459-469, shame); Iphigenæa in Tauris 1217-1218 (pollution); Theophrastes, Characters 16. 14 (the superstitious man spits into his bosom when he sees a madman or an epileptic); Heliodorus, 3. 7. 4 (eye-disease and plague); cf. 3. 8. 1 (on the beneficial gaze of the bird, charadrios), 3. 8. 2 (the harmful gaze of the basilisk); pseudo-Alexander of Aphrodisias, Problematæ 2. 42 (eye-disease; cf. and contrast ps-Aristotle, Problematæ 7. 8, 887a22-7); ibid. 2. 53 (rays from the viewer’s eyes reflected back from corpses affect the viewer’s soul). Cf. Heliodorus, 10. 14. 7 (a girl’s pale skin said to be the result of her mother’s looking at a painting of Andromeda during copulation).


25. Anthologia Palatina 12. 101. 1-3 (τὸν μὲ Πόθος ἀπροσονυμῖπτο στέρνοις Μιύσιος ἐγένετο τοξέας τούτων ἐβόρησε ἔπος· ἱπτὸν ἱρατίν εἰλὸν ἐγὼ — « shooting from his eyes an arrow at me, hitherto unwounded by desire, Myiskos shouted, “I’ve caught that bold one” »), 12. 109, 12. 113.

Anyone who glimpses the rays
glinting from the eyes of Theoxenus
and does not feel his heart swell with desire
has a black heart forged by frigid fire from adamant or iron...

But thanks to Aphrodite, I melt
like the wax of holy bees bitten by the sun’s heat,
whenever I look on the new-limbed youth of boys.

This passage in particular shows that, where it occurs, the active eye of the beloved is focalized from the perspective of the lover — the beloved may be casting rays from his eyes, but the look that is charged with emotion is that of the lover, and all stress is on the lover’s helpless, passive experience of erôs27. We note in particular how in lines 2-3 the lover’s eyes focus on the eyes of the beloved, while in 10-12 it is the entire body of the beautiful youths that attracts his attention. In this way, the « active », quasi-emissionist model of infatuation (in which the lover is affected by rays or glances from the beloved’s eyes) proves to be something of an « optical illusion », because it shades into a more passive conception, in which the lover is the passive recipient of emanations which may come from the beloved’s eyes, but may just as well emanate from his or her entire body. The latter is the case in the celebrated account of erôs in Plato’s Phaedrus (251b-c), where the lover’s desire is the result of the effluence (aporrhoê) of particles from the beautiful body that enter the lover’s soul via his eyes28. This passive model is also the « scientific » explanation of erôs preferred in the Greek novel — the novelists employ the Platonic/Democritean terminology of eidôla and aporrho(i)ai, and describe the onset of love as a


28. See esp. deξάμενος γὰρ τοῦ κάλλος τήν ἀπορροήν διὰ τῶν ὀμάτων ἐθερμανθῆ... ὅταν μὲν οὖν βλέποντα πρὸς τὸ τῶν παιδῶν κάλλος, ἐκεῖθεν μέχρι ἐπιῶντα καὶ θερμαίνεται... δεχομένη ἄρδηται τε καὶ θερμαίνεται — « For once he has received the effluence of beauty via his eyes he becomes hot... Whenever [the soul] looks towards the boy’s beauty and receives the particles that it emits and that flow from it... it is moistened and warmed » ; cf. Cratylus 420b.
result of the influx through the lover’s eyes of emanations from the object of
the gaze. The erotic model of vision, then, can appropriate the emissionist
point of view, but does so in a modified and asymmetric way: the beloved
whose flashing rays melt the lover may sometimes intend this effect, but
the effect is the same whether he does or not, and the counterpart of the
(sometimes) active eye of the beloved is the passive, receptive eye of the
lover — though the lover’s eye is a greedy eye that actively seeks out the
beautiful, it is at the same time the passive victim of the beloved’s beauty
and generally has no power to affect the object of its desires unless that
individual happens to be subject to the same, passive experience of falling
in love. In the novelists, falling in love can be simultaneous and mutual,
in the sense that the beauty of person A affects person B and vice versa,
but the emotion expressed by person A’s eyes does not excite emotion in
person B; instead, each undergoes the same passive experience of being
affected by the other’s beauty. In short, the eye of the beloved, even when
dispasionate, is powerful, while that of the lover, despite the ardour it
expresses, is typically impotent; and this is the case whether the author’s
(implicit or explicit) optical theory is active or passive.

The reason for this is to be sought first of all in the phenomenology of love
in general and of erōs in particular. One of the features that is common to
many of the phenomena that we classify as emotions and the Greeks as pathê
of the soul is their phenomenological passivity — erotic infatuation, like
other emotions, is conceived as a loss of control. A further distinguishing

29. E.g. Achilles Tatius, 1. 9. 4 (« efflux from the beautiful »), 5. 13. 4; Heliodorus, 3.
7. 5.

30. Sophocles, Trachiniae 548-549 (the eye loves to pluck the flower of youth);
Xenophon, Symposium 1. 8-10 (the eyes of lovers are drawn by the beauty and deportment
of the beloved); Anthologia Palatina 5. 100. 2 (the lover hunts with his eyes, but is a
slave to Love), 12. 92 (the lover’s eyes actively hunt boys, but are set ablaze by the sight);
Heliodorus, 1. 2. 5 (the lover is compelled to look), 7. 7. 5 (the eye of the lover can discern
the beloved even at a great distance by the latter’s movement or gesture; so Charicleia is
stung by sight of Theagenes), 7. 7. 7 (when Theagenes recognizes Charicleia he fixes his
eyes on her and is lit up by the shafts from her eyes).

31. Chariton, 1. 1. 6, Xenophon of Ephesus, 1. 3. 1, and Achilles Tatius, 1. 9. 4.

32. For the fundamental conception of (some, many) emotions as forces to which a
person succumbs in the cultural models of a variety of languages, see Zoltan Kövecses,
Metaphor and Emotion: Language, Culture, and Body in Human Feeling, Cambridge,
2000; on symptoms, metaphors, metonyms, and models of erōs, especially in the novel,
see Massimo Fusillo, Il romanzo Greco, Venice, 1988; Herwig Maehler, « Symptome
der Liebe im Roman und in der griechischen Anthologie », Groningen Colloquia on the
Novel 3, 1990, p. 1-12; Claude Calame, The Poetics of Eros in Ancient Greece, Princeton,
mark of Greek erôs is its one-sidedness: the relevant relationships are seen as involving an active erastês and a passive recipient of that person’s attentions, an erômenos or erômenê33. This does not mean that such relationships can never be mutual, but only that my erôs is conceived as something that happens to me as a result of my interest in another party who need not reciprocate that interest. In terms of the « commitment model », proposed by Robert Frank as a (universal) evolutionary explanation for the emotions, the way in which the lover’s gaze is passionate, but powerless, and that of the beloved dispassionate, but powerful would reflect the strategic objective of erôs in convincing the beloved of the strength and durability of the lover’s commitment34. To this there may also be a further ideological dimension, at least in the pederastic relations between an older and a younger male that are the focus of the archaic lyrics and Hellenistic epigrams that we have looked at. The rhetoric of the (active) lover’s helpless enslavement to the passive erômenos disguises the hierarchical and self-centred nature of these relationships. Though the real power lies with the adult male citizen in pursuit, as an object of pleasure, of a boy who is not yet a citizen, the powerful represent themselves as in thrall to the object of their desires. Ideology and phenomenology thus combine to influence the adaptation of models of vision to the model of erôs: both active and passive models of vision are adapted to focus on the desiring subject’s sense of himself as a passive victim.

The supposed reality of the physical affections caused and undergone by the eyes in the case of love forms part of an argument used in both Plutarch, Quaestiones Convivales 5. 7 and Heliodorus, Aethiopica 3. 7. 5 to convince a sceptical audience of the reality of the evil eye (baskania) — if the eyes are the medium of a physical affliction in the case of love (which, it is assumed, everyone accepts) then so can they be in malicious emotions such as envy35. Both these passages seek (Plutarch seriously,
Heliodorus probably parodically\textsuperscript{36} to provide a supposedly scientific rationale for a belief that could be stigmatized as popular superstition, but was clearly widespread\textsuperscript{37}. Though the typical explanation of the evil eye is that a concentration of malign emotion is expressed \textit{via} the eyes at the target\textsuperscript{38}, it is not only malevolent emotions such as anger and envy that can harm: in a passage from Theocritus’ twentieth \textit{Idyll}, a woman who expresses her contempt for her suitor (by fixing him with a sidelong glance) also spits into the bosom of her dress, a gesture used to avert the evil eye\textsuperscript{39}. This is perhaps a metaphorical use of the apotropaic gesture, but the view that an affectionate look from someone in an envious/malign condition can be unintentionally harmful is put forward as a serious one in Plutarch (\textit{QC} 682A-D).

The argument in both Plutarch and Heliodorus requires the materiality of the gaze in the case of love to be assimilated as closely as possible to that of the evil eye; and at a certain level of generality there is indeed a parallel — in both cases we can be affected (\textit{via} our own eyes) by others’ looks.

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\textsuperscript{36} See Di Ckie κ Hἁioἀorἑs λῦ όrἐ. ώiἐ.ῦ p. 21-24 ; 2ῶ-29.

\textsuperscript{37} See most recently the comprehensive account of Thomas Rakoczy, \textit{Böser Blick : Macht des Auges und Neid der Götter}, Tübingen, 1996, p. 186-212.

\textsuperscript{38} Cf. Apollonius Rhodius, 4. 1661-1673 (expresses malice, anger, and resentment); cf. pseudo-Aristotle, \textit{Problematum inedita} 3. 52 Bussemaker; pseudo-Alexander of Aphrodisias, \textit{Problematum} 2. 53; Ideler (the unbalanced \textit{krisis} (mixture) of the envious affects the \textit{krisis} of the target \textit{via} rays (\textit{aktines}) which pass from the eyes of one to the other). Contrast St. Basil, \textit{Homilia} 11 (De Invidia), \textit{PG} 31. 380. 28-37 (\textit{baskania} expresses envy, but the materialist theory is an old wives’ tale; rather, 37-42, evil spirits use the eyes of \textit{baskanoi} for their own purposes).

\textsuperscript{39} Theocritus, 20. 11-15:

tοῦδε μυθῖζοισα τῆς ἐς ἔων ἑπτυσε χόλπον,
καὶ μ’ ἀπό τὰς κεφαλὰς ποτὶ τὸ πόδε συνεχὲς εἶδεν
χέιλες μυκῆζοισα καὶ ὁμίας ὑπα βλέποισα,
καὶ πολὺ τῇ μορφῇ θηλύνετο, καὶ τι σεσαρός
καὶ σοφαρὸν μ’ ἐγέλαξεν.

With such words she spat three times into her bosom and looked me up and down from head to foot, snorting with her mouth and looking askance; she assumed a ladylike posture and mocked me, grinning haughtily.

But there is also a distinct lack of fit between erôs and baskania as manifestations of the materiality of the gaze: the latter illustrates the eyes’ supposed ability actively to infect others with the malicious emotional state of their possessor, whereas in the paradigm scenarios of erôs the active eye of the beloved typically does not express the emotion itself, and the eye of the lover, which does express the emotion, is generally ineffective. The preferred optical theory of both Plutarch and Heliodorus is the passive one, but in both there is a tension between an active model (which suits phthonos) and a passive one (which suits erôs): the Plutarch passage begins with the harmful glance of a particular Pontic tribe to illustrate the general truth that people can be harmed by being the target of others’ looks (680D-F; cf. the « poisoned arrows », πεφαρμαγμένα βέλη, from the eyes of the envious at 681E). But the passage goes on to explain the harm caused by others’ gaze in terms of a more or less passive optical theory in which the eyes are said to be an especially powerful source of the aporrhoiai that the whole body produces (680F-681A). The analogy of erôs is then introduced in a way that initially suggests that it too, like phthonos, involves the active emission of emotion-particles (681A-B):

καὶ τὸν ἐρωτικὸν, ἐὰν δὲ μέγιστα καὶ σφοδρότατα παθήματα τῆς ψυχῆς ἔστιν, ἀρχὴν ἢ δῆμος ἐνδίδοσιν, ὡστε ἑαυτὸν καὶ λείψασθαι τὸν ἐρωτικὸν, ὅταν ἐμβλέψῃ τοῖς καλοῖς, οἷον ἐκχορέυμον εἰς αὐτούς.

Of love, too, which is the greatest and most violent passion of the soul, vision provides the beginning; so that the lover, when he looks upon the beautiful, flows and melts, as if pouring himself out towards them.

It immediately becomes clear, however, that it is the vulnerability of the eye of the lover to the melting looks of the beloved that is being used as an argument for the active ability of the eye to cause harm in baskania (681B-C):

διὸ καὶ θεαμάσεις ἂν τὶς οὕτως μᾶλλον τὸν πάσχειν μὲν καὶ κακοῦσθαι τὸν ἀνθρώπον διὰ τῆς ὁδεγοῦσι οἰομένου, οὐκέτι δὲ δρᾶν καὶ βλάπτειν. αἱ γὰρ ἀντιβλέψεις τῶν ἐν ὁρῷ καὶ τὸ διὰ τῶν ὁμάτων ἐκπέπτων, εἴτε ἃρα φῶς εἶτε ὑδαίμων, τοὺς ἐροῦσιν ἐκπέπτωσιν καὶ ἀπάλλυσι μεθ’ ἡδονῆς ἠγαθόν γεμισμένης, ἵνα αὐτοὶ γλυκύποχοι ὁνομάζουσιν ὡστε γὰρ ἀποτελεῖται ἀντιβλέψεις εἰς συμβάλλει καὶ πάσχειν, ὡς προσβλέπομενοι καὶ προσβλέπωσι. τοιαύτη γὰρ γίνεται διάδοσις καὶ ἀνάφλεξις ἀπὸ τῆς ὁδεγοῦσι, ὡστε παντελῶς ἀπειροτός ἔρωτος ἤγειρενα τοὺς τῶν Μηδικὸν νάρθηκαν θεομαχόντας ἐκ

40. NB. esp. τὸ σῶμα... ἐκπέπτει τινὰς ἀπορροιάς, μάλλον δὲ τοῦτο γίνεσθαι διὰ τῶν ὁφθαλμῶν εἰς ἔστι (« ...the body emits aporrhoia, especially via the eyes... »).
This is why we should be surprised, I think, that people believe that a person can be affected and harmed through sight, but not that they can act and cause harm. For the reciprocated gaze of the beautiful and that which is emitted by the eye, be it light or a current, melt and dissolve the lovers to the accompaniment of a pleasure that is mixed with pain, which they themselves call bittersweet. For neither by touching or hearing are they so wounded and affected, as by looking and being looked upon. Such is the communication and the inflammation that results from sight that one must consider altogether unacquainted with love those who wonder at Median naphtha when it catches fire at a distance from the flame. For the glances of the beautiful, even if they look back from a great distance, kindle fire in the souls of their lovers.

The disanalogy between phthonos and erôs is highlighted by the fact that in phthonos it is the agent of the gaze who is in the grip of a pathos of the soul (681D-E) while in erôs it is the recipient (681A-C).

Heliodorus’ malarial account of phthonos is more consistently passive, but the same tension between the active character of phthonos and the passivity of erôs is still apparent: when someone looks with phthonos at what is beautiful, he fills the surrounding air with his malign quality, 3. 7. 3; but in erôs the affection enters the soul via the eyes as a result of what the lover has seen, a sign of the eyes’ receptivity to aporrhoiai, 3. 7. 5. The passive model is credited with quasi-active powers in the case of phthonos, but not in that of erôs.

In broad terms, then, it is true to say that the Greeks had a belief that others’ eyes could be harmful, and that a person’s own eyes could be receptive to various harmful or disturbing influxes, both from the eyes of others and from other sources. But we cannot generalize to any universal applicability of these notions: the look of a lover, it seems, can infect a person with the evil eye, but is unlikely to transmit the lover’s erôs; and there is an asymmetry between the evil eye (in which others’ eyes can straightforwardly transmit what those individuals are feeling and achieve the desired effect on their target) and erôs (in which neither party straightforwardly uses the eyes to transmit emotion). Though in very general terms similar beliefs in the physical consequences of seeing and being seen can be used in the explanation of both phenomena, the preferred optical theory conditions but does not determine the presentation of the two emotions; the independent folk theories of the two emotions, even when they come into contact with optical theory, remain (in different ways) resistant to absorption into a single, over-arching theory.
In the case of these emotions a concept of vision as a process of physical contact is clearly activated, and there genuinely is a sense that the eye has the potential to send or receive emotions which have powerful physical effects on their target. But in the case of other emotions, this potential is very often ignored. Though the angry can occasionally be credited with the power to harm that is more often attributed to the envious, one should not generalize from these occurrences. There are numerous passages from Homer on in which a character’s eyes express anger; it is part of the definition of anger as the Greeks understood it that the patient of the emotion desires to inflict retaliatory harm on its target; but though the Homeric poems (e.g.) are full of angry looks, there is not a single case in which the scowls, frowns, blazing eyes, or evil looks of the angry individual have any harmful effect on the target of his or her anger. On occasion, in fact, a belief in the power of the eye to harm would be incompatible with typical scenarios of social and ocular interaction — if there were a consistent and universal belief that looks could kill, no angry individual would use visual cut-off (i.e. deliberately look away) as a way of punishing an offender’s lack of respect.

The widespread belief that vision is a process involving physical contact between perceived and perceiver certainly means that there are particular reasons to pay special attention to the role of the eyes in Greek models of emotion; but we have no warrant to generalize from the physical efficacies

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41. See (e.g.) Apollonius of Rhodes, 4. 1661-1673 (n. 38 above). That the notion of the material power of the gaze to harm is implicitly present in descriptions of angry looks etc. is the view of Thomas RAKOCZY, Böser Blick, op. cit. (n. 35), passim (esp. p. 33, 42-52 on Homer); cf. Steven H. LONSDALE, « If Looks Could Kill: paptainó and the Interpenetration of Imagery and Narrative in Homer », Classical Journal, 84, 4, 1989, p. 325-333.


or vulnerability of the eye in some scenarios to an all-encompassing universal belief in the physical effects of seeing and being seen; these models of vision are enlisted in support of cultural models of emotion where they fit, modified where they fit less well, and ignored when they do not fit at all.