

REFLECTION



The look of love

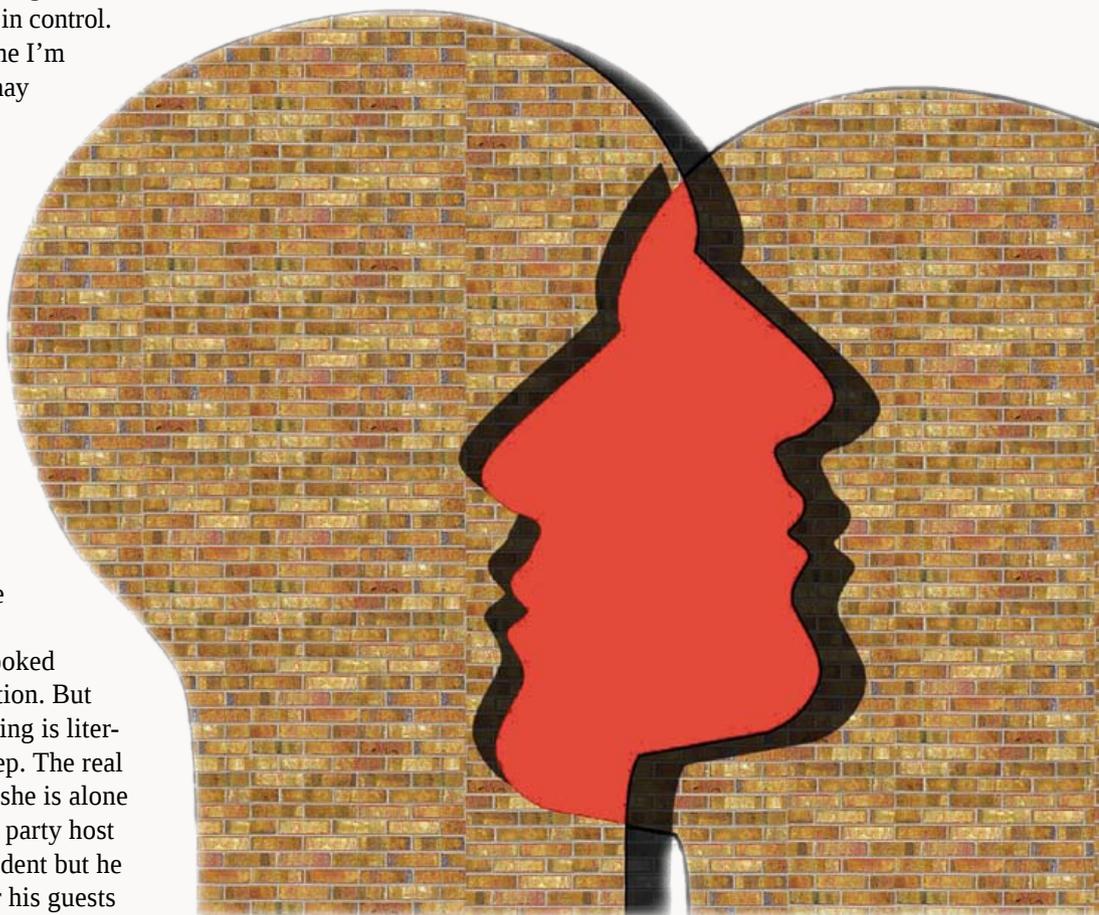
Robbie Young reflects on the way we look at one another and suggests that the real 'look of love' is one which flows with mercy and kindness.

You may be sitting on a bus looking at your fellow passengers secretly giving them points out of ten for dress, appearance, class, likelihood of helping you to fix a puncture or picking your pocket. But if you notice someone is looking at you, most probably you would begin to feel uncomfortable. As long as I'm the one doing the looking I'm in control. When you are looking at me I'm at my most vulnerable. I may have spent a small fortune on a party dress but I can do nothing to stop you whispering to your friend: 'I wouldn't be caught dead in that.'

Before a fight, boxers try to stare down each other. Their body language is all about saying: 'me looking at you is more intimidating than you looking at me.' Then there is the celebrity on the red carpet lapping up being looked at wearing a Rodarte creation. But we all know that such gazing is literally no more than skin deep. The real looking takes place when she is alone in front of the mirror. The party host may look supremely confident but he can never be sure whether his guests

are looking at him with admiration or with expertly disguised disdain. Sartre has a play called 'No Exit' which contains the famous line: 'Hell is other people.' It's the hell of the ego which wants absolute autonomy but is forced to live in a world where it is being watched by others.

One option is to revolt against this state of being dependent on another's gaze. Like the heavyweight boxer I can stare down anyone who dares to look me in the eye. It's an option but not a solution. If I find myself undergoing surgery am I going to stare down the surgeon? Especially when my very survival depends on the surgeon looking at me with eyes that are filled with benevolence?



It might appear that two people in love as they stare into each others' eyes have solved the angst of looking and being looked at. Both can say: 'I don't care how others look at me, there is one person whose gaze affirms every fibre of my being.' But how deep does the lover's look really go? Will I never do anything that I would be ashamed of, even or especially in front of the one who loves me? So ashamed that I will try to hide it? If that's the case then more than ever I crave to be looked upon with love knowing at the same time that I don't deserve it. The best I can do is beg for forgiveness. I have reached vulnerability's ground zero.

Recently I listened to a programme on BBC Radio. It was about a woman searching for her mother who had given her up for adoption when she was born. She eventually tracked down her mother only to find that she was a totally dysfunctional alcoholic unable to cope with life. Her face was bruised from a recent fall, her voice loud and abrasive.

With tears running down her eyes, the woman embraced her mother. She took care of her until she died. Words fail us if we try to describe the look of love which overflows with kindness and mercy. But we recognise it when we see it, especially if we are the object of its gaze. And if we allow its gaze to be ours then miracles can begin to happen around us: a difficult work colleague becomes a trusted friend; a long running dispute with a next-door neighbour is ended; a marriage about to break up blossoms again. 