Over time, the African continent has been framed by concepts that relate to its development, with some more comprehensive than others. The concepts were initially created outside the continent, primarily in Western institutions and agencies, and sought to describe and understand Africa, but also to legitimize external interventions driven by religious, military, political, economic, exploitative and altruistic motives.

The concepts addressed in this book capture four themes that represent central aspects of the West’s framing of African development: (i) the concept of the “other”, addressing the question of culture and representation in the context of development, (ii) the concept of poverty and how to address it, i.e. the empowerment and livelihood concepts, (iii) concepts addressing displacement and comprising the concept of primitive accumulation, and (iv) concepts relating to food security and food sovereignty that connect to agricultural production-, sustainability-, rights- and power issues.

In order to challenge the concepts selected and relating to the framing of African development, we find it necessary to understand their logic and the underlying process of their construction. In brief, to challenge the concepts mentioned above necessarily implies reflecting on the ways in which we in the West have historically developed our narratives in the social, economic, technological and cultural fields. This leads us to a critical analysis of the Western vision of Africa, its development and people.

Addressing the Logic and the Underlying Process of Construction of the Concepts

Reflecting on the mythification of optical technology, we find that its development could serve as a metaphor or a departure point to understand how

1 I am grateful for comments to this introductory chapter, in particular regarding the example of the construction of the Western visual technology to Edyala Lima de Iglesias. I am also thankful to Deborah Bryceson for comments to this version of the chapter and to Mats Härsmar, Terje Oestigaard and Clive Liddiard for comments to earlier versions.
Western civilization has built up some concepts to make them to be perceived as the significant of “real”, of “true” and of “universal”. As we know, within Western civilization the duality “reality” and “truth” operates as if it was “natural”: what our eyes see is perceived to be “real” and therefore represents “truth” (Barthes 1972).

To point out some aspects of the Western narrative logic that interests us, we chose the historical period of the Renaissance, characterized by the advent of the camera obscura\(^2\) and of perspectiva artificialis\(^3\) as well as the emergence of the Cartesian subject (Grosholz 1991). The construction of this Western “look” interests us less as a technical device per se, and more on account of its consequences in the structuring of a logic and a perspective that reflect Western cultural values and visions. The images produced by this strictly codified perspective, or frame, were considered a physiological reproduction of what the human eye could “naturally” see, therefore approaching “representation” of “reality”, naturalizing an ideological perspective – making believe that the image really reproduces what the human eye “naturally” captures.

This ideological aspect of the technology used in the manufacture of photographic and cinematographic cameras reveals the maintenance of the parameters and codes of the specular vision defined by the Renaissance. In a way, from the camera obscura through the optical engineering applied to photographic, cinematographic and TV lenses, right up to digital technology, the axis of visual technological development reveals the Western ambition to attain the most “exact” representation of reality. In fact, the technology present in the camera lenses of today obeys the principles already existing in the technique used by many painters of the Renaissance, giving continuity to a certain way of constructing “reality” – of “seeing” the world and identifying it with a “neutral” and “scientific” vision of the world – although in fact it is generated by culture.

The central point (the eye-subject) constructed by the perspectiva artificialis corresponds to the place that Western, white, Christian Man has assigned to himself. He is not only “the centre”, but also the origin of all sense – a sort of

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2 Latin expression that signifies “dark chamber” – the basis for the modern photographic camera. The camera obscura meant the existence of a device that mechanically reproduces the perspective from a central point, as the way “man sees the world”. It appears that a number of artists during the 17th and 18th centuries secretly employed the technique in order to draft with “photographic” precision landscapes, nature and portraits. See Lacorre (2010).

3 A technique in which the current Western system of representation has its origin. The perspectiva artificialis is meant to create the impression of a third dimension in the two-dimensional frame of a painting or a photograph.