

# Seeing the Visual in U.S. History

James W. Cook

---

Seeing currently occupies a paradoxical position in the new sensory history. On the one hand, it is the most familiar of the five senses, the perceptual register that comes to mind most readily and easily. It is also the sense with the longest and deepest historiographical paper trail. Whereas smells, touches, tastes, and sounds have only recently begun to emerge as explicit topics of historical analysis, visual images now constitute a thoroughly conventional evidentiary resource (and not just in the highly circumscribed sense of images as illustrations). Starting in the 1970s, moreover, major scholarly debates on the dynamics of gazing, the proliferation of surveillance, and the production of spectacle made it easier to appreciate that the province of seeing extends well beyond images. By the early 1990s, this innovative but still-fragmented body of work had coalesced into a recognizable field of historical inquiry. No longer was seeing something that could be taken for granted as a mere condition of sentience or treated in vaguely universalist terms. The act of looking, we had come to realize, varied considerably across eras, institutions, media, social groups, and even nations.<sup>1</sup>

One might thus expect seeing to occupy a privileged place in a broader history of the senses. After all, vision was the acknowledged starting point, the perceptual register that generated the first questions about context and change over time. Yet it is precisely vision's privileged status that has come under attack in much of the best recent scholarship. In his 2006 book, *How Race Is Made*, Mark M. Smith argued, "We have lost sight of other ways to understand beyond vision and, in the process, have quietly endorsed the long-

James W. Cook is associate professor of history and American culture at the University of Michigan. For their help with this essay, he would like to thank Sara Blair, Paul Anderson, Matt Lassiter, Macdonald Moore, John Carson, Marcy Sacks, Martin Jay, Alex Olson, Rita Chin, Edward T. Linenthal, Mark Smith, Stephen D. Andrews, Susan Armeny, and the *JAH*'s anonymous readers.

<sup>1</sup> On the distinction between images as evidence and images as illustrations, see Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven, 2002); Jules David Prown, *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven, 2001); and Joshua Brown, *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* (Berkeley, 2002). Seminal works in visual studies include Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York, 1961); John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, 1972); Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October*, 39 (Winter 1986), 3–64; Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle, 1988); Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York, 1990); David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago, 1991); and Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, 1993). For helpful genealogies of the emerging field of visual studies, see the "Questionnaire on Visual Culture," *October*, 77 (Summer 1996), 25–70; Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader* (London, 1998); Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, eds., *Visual Culture: The Reader* (London, 1999); W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture*, 1 (Aug. 2002), 165–81; and Margarita Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005).

standing tendency to denigrate the nonvisual, 'lower' senses. As the growing literature on the anthropology of the senses suggests, there is no compelling reason for historians to fixate on what was seen rather than heard, smelled, tasted, and touched." David Howes's 2005 essay, "Empires of the Senses," pushes further, applauding the "ideological revolution" that has turned the tables on Western "ocularcentrism" and "the tyranny of the science of signs." For Howes, vision's centrality is above all a methodological obstacle to be overcome en route to a more "full-bodied" and "cross-cultural" understanding of sensory experience.<sup>2</sup>

My point here is not to disparage the critical impulses running through such recent scholarship, much of which I admire. The move to a broader, multisensory history has productively complicated matters in at least three major respects: first, by pushing against our older habit of treating vision as a synecdoche for human perception; second, by opening up new areas of historical inquiry largely inconceivable in visual terms; and third, by demonstrating that seeing is always mediated by and through other forms of sensory experience.

Still, I find myself less persuaded by some of the accompanying efforts to cast our ongoing fascination with the visual as a source of "heuristic poverty"; or as part of the dominant Western episteme from which we now need to "liberate ourselves."<sup>3</sup> What concerns me about such rhetorical gestures is not so much the desire to knock vision down a peg as the tendency to reduce vision's role and function to those of historiographical hegemon. In my experience, the collective project of historicizing vision has never involved uncritical celebrations or totalizing claims. On the contrary, my earliest training proceeded from the assumption that seeing is always culturally mediated, chronologically contingent, and interwoven with structures of power. The insight that ocularcentrism has a long Western history would come as no surprise to most of the scholars who helped to build visual studies over two decades ago. In fact, it was historians of visuality who introduced this line of critique to a broader academic readership during the late 1980s.<sup>4</sup>

As a first step, then, it seems important to salvage some of the core insights and foundational debates that have made visual studies an essential component of what we now call the "cultural turn" in late twentieth-century historiography.<sup>5</sup> But I also want to think more carefully about the analytical status of ocularcentrism in the larger project of multisensory history. In recent years, the term *ocularcentrism* has come to serve as an all-pur-

<sup>2</sup> Mark M. Smith, *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (Chapel Hill, 2006), 2–3; David Howes, "Empires of the Senses," in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (New York, 2005), 1–2. In 1991 David Howes argued more strongly that the "need for us to experiment with other ways of sensing the world has never been more acute. Indeed, if we do not 'come to our senses soon,' we will have permanently forfeited the chance of constructing any meaningful alternatives to the pseudo-existence which passes for life in our current 'Civilization of the Image.'" David Howes, "To Summon All the Senses," in *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, ed. David Howes (Toronto, 1991), 4. This rhetorical pattern runs through much of the recent scholarship on sound, smell, touch, and taste. See, for example, Steven Connor, "Sound and the Self," in *Hearing History: A Reader*, ed. Mark M. Smith (Athens, Ga., 2004), 54–55.

<sup>3</sup> Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, 2001), 262; Howes, "To Summon All the Senses," 4.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Foster. Martin Jay employed the concept of ocularcentrism as part of an effort to denaturalize older Enlightenment models of vision as the Western master sense.

<sup>5</sup> On the symbiotic relationship between visual studies and cultural history, see George H. Roeder Jr., "Filling in the Picture: Visual Culture," *Reviews in American History*, 26 (March 1998), 275–93; Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene Przyblyski, eds., *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader* (New York, 2004); Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture*; and James W. Cook, Lawrence Glickman, and Michael O'Malley, eds., *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History* (Chicago, forthcoming).

pose critical category, simultaneously used to describe a much older philosophical ideal (the valorization of sight as the noblest of the five senses) and a more contemporary historiographical reflex (our own tendency to imagine the past in visual terms). Ocularcentrism, in these formulations, is understood as something one can retroactively mitigate by adopting new modes of questioning and archival strategies.

Less clear is how our own efforts to mitigate, to unthink, ocularcentrism might relate to the lived histories of those who first identified visual representation as a primary arena of ideological struggle. Over the past two centuries, such struggles have taken a variety of forms: from Frederick Douglass's seminal writings on the relation between pictures and politics and Sojourner Truth's efforts to control her public image through photographic portraits to Emma Goldman's strategic uses of media spectacles to agitate for women's rights and James Young Deer's battles to produce commercial films that pictured Indians as something other than "yelling, paint bedaubed creature[s], reeking of barbarism." In those cases (and many more like them), thinking beyond vision was never an easy or straightforward epistemological choice. Indeed, for the many groups of modern Americans fighting to see and be seen on their own terms, the only *real* choice was how to combat one mode of public visibility with another.<sup>6</sup>

### Toward a History of Visual History

Depending on one's disciplinary priorities, it would be possible to assemble any number of visual turns in late twentieth-century historiography. Those interested in motion pictures, for example, would probably begin during the early 1980s, as older models of a unitary cinematic "spectator" (often grounded in psychoanalysis) gave way to more carefully contextualized histories of film reception.<sup>7</sup> Those working closer to the fine arts might start with Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972), which pioneered the concept of a "period eye," or Svetlana Alpers's *The Art of Describing* (1982), one of the first studies to employ the term "visual culture" to argue for the primacy of images over texts in certain historical contexts.<sup>8</sup> Still others working in subaltern studies would surely emphasize Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952),

<sup>6</sup> John Stauffer, "Frederick Douglass and the Aesthetics of Freedom," *Raritan*, 25 (Summer 2005), 114–36; Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York, 1996); Augusta Rohrbach, "Profits of Protest: The Market Strategies of Sojourner Truth and Louisa May Alcott," in *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism*, ed. Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer (New York, 2006), 235–55; Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000); Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence, 2004), 92.

<sup>7</sup> Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York, 1980); Linda Williams, "'Something Else besides a Mother': 'Stella Dallas' and the Maternal Melodrama," *Cinema Journal*, 24 (Fall 1984), 2–27; Miriam Hansen, "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship," *ibid.*, 25 (Summer 1986), 6–32; Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford, 1972); Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago, 1983). Recent studies of American painting and photography that have resonated among U.S. historians include Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875* (Ithaca, 1993); Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven, 1993); David Lubin, *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven, 1994); Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton, 1999); Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill, 2000); Margaretta Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution: Painters, Artisans, and Patrons in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2005); Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley, 2006); and Sara Blair, *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 2007).

which introduced the problem of racialized perception into the vast historiography on colonialism.<sup>9</sup>

Among the many fine histories of Western industrialization, Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey* (originally published in German in 1977) stands out for its sharp insights into how new transportation systems led to a recalibration of human perception by creating more "panoramic" views of the passing landscape.<sup>10</sup> In U.S. cultural history, Neil Harris and John Kasson deserve particular mention for their studies of early mass entertainment. At a moment when most historians remained entirely text bound (and well before Guy DeBord's 1967 political manifesto, *The Society of the Spectacle*, had achieved a wide readership in this country), Harris's 1973 biography of P. T. Barnum and Kasson's 1978 study of Coney Island demonstrated how much new forms of visual stimulation fueled the rise of modern American consumerism.<sup>11</sup>

This diverse body of work made it easier to differentiate the multiple historical dimensions of seeing: a sensory activity as well as a culturally mediated form of perception, a spectrum of representations as well as a diverse mix of observational techniques, the figurative sense of vision as insight as well as the more literal act of looking, unconscious apprehension as well as structured spectatorship. During the late 1970s and the 1980s, moreover, such studies helped shape the new cultural history, with its characteristic emphases on symbolic systems, representational struggles, and historically contingent ways of seeing. In many respects, though, what I have described thus far was merely the starting point of a much larger scholarly conversation. Indeed, by the time I entered graduate school in 1990, a number of powerful new ideas were beginning to reshape the contours of visual history.

Among the most crucial influences were Walter Benjamin's recently rediscovered essays on the *flâneur* (literally, one who saunters or loafs), a nineteenth-century social type known for his roving forms of urban spectatorship.<sup>12</sup> Part of what made these essays so

<sup>9</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1952; New York, 1967). See esp. *ibid.*, chap. 5, "The Fact of Blackness."

<sup>10</sup> Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (1977; Berkeley, 1986). On the role of technology in reshaping visual perception, see also Donald M. Lowe, *History of Bourgeois Perception* (Chicago, 1982); Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983); Caroline Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New* (New York, 1988); and David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Chicago, 1973); John Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York, 1978). See also the influential essay: Neil Harris, "Iconography and Intellectual History: The Halfpence Effect," in *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, ed. John Higham and Paul Conkin (Baltimore, 1979); and John Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine* (New York, 1976). Among the many pioneering works in U.S. cultural history that devote attention to visual questions, see, for example, Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950); Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (Chicago, 1965); William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York, 1973); Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Social History of American Movies* (New York, 1975); Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian, from Columbus to the Present* (New York, 1979); Lois Banner, *American Beauty* (Chicago, 1983); Bryan Jay Wolf, *Romantic Re-Vision: Culture and Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century American Painting and Literature* (Chicago, 1982); Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley, 1985); Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York, 1989); Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880–1940* (Chapel Hill, 1989); and Joy S. Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture* (New Haven, 1990). Guy DeBord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, 1970).

<sup>12</sup> On the *flâneur*, see, for example, Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, by Walter Benjamin, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1968), 155–200; Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London, 1973); and Walter Benjamin, "Convolute M [The Flâneur]," in *The Arcades Project*, by Walter Benjamin, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge,

important in the early 1990s was their ability to interweave material transformations in the shape and structure of cities with more localized changes in individual sensory experience. *Flânerie*, in Benjamin's innovative schema, was no simple stroll through Second Empire Paris. It defined a distinctly late capitalist mode of mobile perception in which new forms of commodity display and the disorienting rush of tumultuous crowds became primary objects of urban curiosity. What Benjamin helped me (and many others) imagine was a crucial but previously neglected area of historical analysis: the process whereby modern eyes adapted to rapidly changing urban environments and new social values attached to particular modes of looking.<sup>13</sup>

Equally fundamental were Michel Foucault's landmark writings on the "gazes" constructed through medical clinics, asylums, and prisons. That gazes could be critiqued and explicated was hardly original to Foucault (in France alone, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jacques Lacan had all employed the term as a category of analysis years or even decades earlier). What set Foucault's work apart was its more explicit understanding of vision as complicitous with new forms of power. More than any other late twentieth-century thinker, it was Foucault who demonstrated that the seemingly natural and timeless act of looking was mediated by cultural constructions, many of them far from innocent. Gazes could be conceptualized as part of the epistemological distinction between reason and insanity: the "clear" and "penetrating" vision valorized by Enlightenment science versus the unbridled "dazzlement" of the madman. Or they could be built into new systems of discipline such as Jeremy Bentham's widely influential model for a "panopticon" prison, which replaced the older public spectacle of the executioner's scaffold with a more diffuse and disembodied model of institutional surveillance. Whereas Benjamin chronicled a post-Enlightenment viewing subject increasingly open to the swirl and flux of metropolitan stimulation, Foucault emphasized the position of those pathologized as "blind" to reason or caught in the centralized and unrelenting stares of modern disciplinary regimes.<sup>14</sup>

For my purposes, Benjamin's and Foucault's theoretical innovations were less important as ends in themselves than as powerful touchstones for some of the best new scholarship in U.S. history. Consider, for example, Karen Halttunen's *Confidence Men and Painted Women* (1982) and John Kasson's *Rudeness and Civility* (1991), two widely influential studies of nineteenth-century manners.<sup>15</sup> Neither book explicitly mentions Benjamin's work on *flânerie*. And in many respects, the stories they tell about the new middle-class quest for fixed and legible forms of respectable character seem to push in precisely

---

Mass., 1999). See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989); Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (London, 1996); and Vanessa R. Schwartz, "Walter Benjamin for Historians," *American Historical Review*, 106 (Dec. 2001), 1721–43.

<sup>13</sup> Particularly helpful as a counterpart to Benjamin's work on the *flâneur* is Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. and trans. Kurt Wolff (1903; New York, 1950).

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1973); Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1965); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1979). On Michel Foucault's work on visibility, see Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 377–416; John Rajchman, "Foucault's Art of Seeing," *October*, 44 (Spring 1988), 89–117; and Thomas Flynn, "Foucault and the Eclipse of Vision," in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (Berkeley, 1993). In an interview from the late 1970s, Foucault described his work on "panopticism" as a natural outgrowth of his earlier studies of medical clinics. See Michel Foucault, "The Eye of Power," *Power/Knowledge: Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, by Michel Foucault, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (New York, 1980), 146–47.

<sup>15</sup> Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven, 1982); Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*.



the opposite direction. For the anxious souls who fill Halttunen's and Kasson's pages, the burgeoning crowds of the antebellum metropolis were a source of dread rather than an object of fascination and pleasure. In stark contrast to the *flâneur's* celebration of ocular immersion, middle-class conduct manuals responded with calls for visual reserve and strict social differentiation.

The more I pondered these developments, however, the clearer it became that Benjamin, Halttunen, and Kasson were explicating two sides of the same historical process. Both sets of narratives hinged on the chronic semiotic confusion sparked by rapid demographic mobility, market expansion, and urbanization across the nineteenth century: a brave new world in which traditional systems of visual identification (based, for example, on dress or bodily comportment) no longer seemed to signify in consistent and reliable ways. In Benjamin's version of the story, the key by-product of such confusion was the *flâneur* himself—a new urban social type whose very openness to perceptual shock experiences marked him as modern. Halttunen and Kasson, by contrast, described the stakes in broader terms, arguing that many of the moral values and aesthetic forms of new middle-class culture—from the valorization of personal sincerity to the proliferation of urban sketch literature—were creative responses to the perceptual challenges of reading the city.<sup>16</sup>

For my own work on P. T. Barnum, these ideas were especially helpful in two ways: first, by demonstrating that perceptual adaptation often went hand in hand with new modes of class formation and aesthetic innovation; and second, by suggesting how the semiotic changes fueled by modernization registered in public discourse and moral values. Barnum, I began to realize, was the key U.S. cultural figure in the historical transition to a more self-conscious understanding of vision's "fallibility."<sup>17</sup> Whereas Halttunen and Kasson emphasized the new middle-class quest for perceptual control, my concern was to explain the enormous popularity of Barnum's visual trickery in the context of that quest. Certainly, no other contemporary artist or intellectual was more closely associated with perceptual confusion than the legendary Prince of Humbug, who spent much of his career exhibiting deliberately ambiguous objects such as the Feejee Mermaid and the Woolly Horse. Yet Barnum did not simply trick the eyes of his consumers. More typically, he orchestrated intriguing public debates around the moral, legal, and political implications of such trickery, encouraging his audiences to weigh in on the novel modes of perceptual instability that their collective guessing was helping to create.

This slippery but pervasive mode of visual culture (a phenomenon I described as the "arts of deception") made it easier to answer a pressing question from the early debates in visual studies: namely, how a post-Enlightenment conception of subjective vision first

<sup>16</sup> See Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." Scholars have recently added rich new layers to this story. See, for example, Stuart Blumin, "George G. Foster and the Emerging Metropolis," in *New York by Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches*, by George G. Foster, ed. Stuart M. Blumin (Berkeley, 1990), 1–61; Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York, 1991); Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (Chicago, 1992); Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley, 1993); Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York, 1994); Deborah Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca, 1995); and David Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); James W. Cook, ed., *The Colossal P. T. Barnum Reader: Nothing Else like It in the Universe* (Urbana, 2005). On the shift to a more subjective conception of vision in early nineteenth-century philosophy, art, and perceptual science and the consequently heightened problem of fallibility, see Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*; and Jay, *Downcast Eyes*. See also Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (New York, 2000).

crystallized as social and ideological convention. For those caught in the showman's dizzying webs of self-accusation and contradictory promotional claims, seeing definitely was *not* believing. And in many cases, the older Enlightenment ideal of transparently true forms of visual knowledge began to seem like a sucker's bet, the very antithesis of metropolitan sophistication and consumer savvy.<sup>18</sup>

Yet these growing doubts about vision often coexisted with new expressions of ocular mastery, a pattern well demonstrated by some of Barnum's other characteristic productions. Side-by-side with his exhibitory hoaxes were dozens of "living curiosities" (conjoined twins, bearded ladies, missing links, etc.), most of which middle-class audiences perceived and categorized as authentic representations of physical, cultural, sexual, and racial difference. On this latter score, the emerging historiography on museums and expositions was especially helpful. Robert Rydell's *All the World's a Fair* (1984) is a good case in point. Operating in much the same analytical terrain as Foucault's early work on asylums and prisons, Rydell set out to explore the question of how ideologies of racial distinction were built into the very modes of display championed by designers of late nineteenth-century American expositions. What set those displays apart, he argued, was not simply their large capital investments and vast geographic scale, but also their comprehensiveness as "symbolic universes": a new and more totalizing species of mass culture, in which visual tableaux of nationalism, imperialism, and white supremacy asserted the rise of U.S. hegemony.<sup>19</sup>

Subsequent work pushed this line of questioning in new directions. Donna Haraway and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett made it easier to see the ideological cracks and variations within the spectacles themselves—for example, the ethnographic displays of non-white subjects in putatively natural settings that often commingled with more carefully contextualized or obviously theatrical forms of exhibitionism. Gail Bederman, Richard White, and L. G. Moses, by contrast, demonstrated just how much the exhibitions were contested sites, often provoking demonstrations or oppositional displays by minority groups unwilling to tolerate the highly circumscribed visions of American progress materialized by curators, showmen, and fair designers.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> For an example of the early scholarship that did not follow the emergence of "subjective vision" beyond academic philosophy and science, see Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 124. On the popularization of the post-Enlightenment model of subjective vision, see Cook, *Arts of Deception*, esp. 73–118.

<sup>19</sup> On Barnum's "living curiosities," see Cook, *Arts of Deception*, 1–29, 119–62; James W. Cook, "The Architect of the Modern Culture Industry," in *Colossal P. T. Barnum Reader*, ed. Cook, 1–8; and "Gallery Three: Barnum's Gallery of Wonders," *ibid.*, 155–82. See also Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago, 1988); Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York, 1996); and Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis, 1997). Theoretical studies helpful in conceptualizing viewership include Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass., 1984); Peter Stallybrass and Alon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, 1986); and David Hevey, *The Creatures That Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imaginery* (New York, 1992). Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago, 1984). For a later study of exhibitions that integrates Foucault's ideas more systematically, see Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (New York, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Objects of Ethnography," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, 1991), 386–443. Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936," *Social Text*, 11 (Winter 1984–1985), 20–64; Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago, 1995); Richard White, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill," in *The Frontier in American Culture*, ed. James Grossman (Berkeley, 1994), 7–66; L. G. Moses, *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians, 1883–1933* (Albuquerque, 1996). On race, representation, and power, see, for example, Henry Louis Gates Jr., "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations*,

The political climate of the mid-1990s was important here, too. It was at this very moment that national battles about the Smithsonian Institution's *Enola Gay* exhibition began to erupt, eventually prompting congressional efforts to curtail federal funding in lieu of major changes in curatorial content.<sup>21</sup> To scholars interested in the ideological and political stakes of exhibitions, the Smithsonian "history wars" suggested a pair of crucial lessons: Struggles over representation are always bound up with institutional power, law, and policy making; and for those who lack the clout or resources to control the larger process, it is precisely how the past is "seen" that constitutes the most significant potential casualty.

### Why Ocularcentrism Remains, Well, Central

I want to conclude by connecting some of my earlier questions about the concept of ocularcentrism to one of the early twentieth century's most famous statements on racial identity. The passage is W. E. B. Du Bois's widely influential meditation on "second sight" in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903):

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, or measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>22</sup>

For those of us conditioned by such statements to think of racial distinction as a visual problem, recent work in sensory history has provided important correctives. Most fundamentally, this scholarship has made it easier to grasp the manifold ways ideologies of racial difference regularly invoked multiple sensory registers: the long-running stereotypes about the smell of African American workers, for instance, or less familiar ideas about the taste and touch of slave women articulated in plantation households. As Mark M. Smith has persuasively argued, nonvisual attitudes about race were often expressed by their white proponents, not as reasoned arguments, but as "gut feelings"—a mode of expression that has also made them harder to identify, historicize, and eradicate.<sup>23</sup>

But what are we to make of the chronic ocularcentrism running through so much of the work generated by minority writers themselves? In the passage by Du Bois quoted above, virtually every sentence emphasizes some facet of visual perception. From the odd

---

24 (Fall 1988), 129–55; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York, 1993); Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, 1998); Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York, 2000); and Rosalyn Poignant, *Professional Savages: Captive Lives and Western Spectacle* (New Haven, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York, 1996). On the politics of historical commemorations, see also John Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, 1994); Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, 1997); Kristin Ann Hass, *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (Berkeley, 1998); and David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001).

<sup>22</sup> Eric Sundquist, ed., *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader* (New York, 1996), 102.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, *How Race Is Made*, 1–10.



“sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” to the problematic experience of “measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity,” this is a statement of racial identity shot through with the experiences of seeing and being seen. It is also a statement that is quite explicit about the highly circumscribed forms of agency with which Du Bois developed his sense of self. “Second sight,” he emphasizes, was not a personal or existential choice so much as a condition imposed by “a world which yields . . . no true self-consciousness.” The “dogged strength” necessary to combat that condition is one forged in opposition to ideological and institutional forces that have made “double consciousness,” above all, an ocular problem.

Such battles around seeing were never restricted to African American intellectuals or literary activism. As John Kuo-Wei Tchen has powerfully demonstrated, some of the very first Chinese artists to arrive in this country struggled to define the terms of their public identities in cultural markets thoroughly saturated with orientalist stereotypes. In many cases, the stereotypes actually preceded widespread Chinese American immigration, a pattern that placed itinerant performers such as Afong Moy, Chang and Eng Bunker, and the Tong Hook Tong Dramatic Company in the unenviable position of calculating degrees of representational control against the possibilities of mainstream market success. The results, Tchen suggested, were routinely mixed. While some performers fired their American handlers, rewrote their promotional materials, and achieved considerable profits, others struggled to navigate a semiotic system in which the images and entertainments marketed as Chinese hardly resembled their own cultural traditions.<sup>24</sup>

A few decades later, in the 1910s and 1920s, the Native American film director, James Young Deer, similarly engaged one of the central challenges of twentieth-century representational politics, namely, how to work in image industries largely governed by majority tastes. Much like the early African American filmmaker Oscar Micheaux, Young Deer quickly discovered that conceiving of “Indian pictures” on his own terms was merely the first step. One also had to find investors willing to put up the capital to make the films, distributors willing to circulate them, theater managers willing to order the products, and audiences willing to pay for tickets. As Philip Deloria has recently shown, there was no Hollywood “happy ending” here. By the mid-1910s, the “measure of autonomy” that Indian actors and directors had achieved in the pre-studio system gave way to corporate consolidation and plot standardization. In the longer sweep of Native American history, however, Young Deer’s efforts marked a crucial new development, for they recognized “that political and legal struggles are tightly linked to the ideologies and images—the expectations—that non-Indians have built around Native people.”<sup>25</sup>

These brief examples point to a number of conclusions. One has to do with the ongoing politicization of the visual. For at least two centuries, Americans of many different backgrounds have focused on the question of visual representation precisely because the

<sup>24</sup> John Kuo-Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776–1882* (Baltimore, 1999). For studies that follow these issues into the twentieth century, see Robert G. Lee, *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia, 1999); Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s–1920s* (New Brunswick, 2005); and Mary Ting Yi Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery: Murder, Miscegenation, and Other Dangerous Encounters in Turn-of-the-Century New York City* (Princeton, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 52–108, esp. 104. On Native American representational politics, see also Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast* (Durham, 2005); Michael D. McNally, “The Indian Passion Play: Contesting the Real Indian in ‘Song of Hiawatha’ Pageants, 1901–1965,” *American Quarterly*, 58 (March 2006), 105–36; and Mary Lawlor, *Public Native America: Tribal Self-Representations in Casinos, Museums, and Powwows* (New Brunswick, 2006).

terrain of ideological and cultural struggle was becoming so intensely ocularcentric. They did so, moreover, not out of some naïve notion that it was possible to control that terrain fully or consistently, but because they recognized that representation and self-determination were inextricably linked. In a public sphere increasingly driven by mass-circulated images, the ways we see are never simply the stuff of sensory experience—they are also part and parcel of a new kind of politics.

Acknowledging these patterns need not lead us to assume that seeing was the only perceptual register that mattered. Du Bois himself, after all, built an aural component into the very structure of *The Souls of Black Folk*, beginning each new chapter with epigraphic transcriptions of “sorrow songs” designed to showcase the power and beauty of black folk traditions.<sup>26</sup> Du Bois’s multidimensional work thus provides a useful touchstone for current scholars seeking to push beyond methodological zero sums that pit one perceptual register against another. But his work also reminds us that in structuring the historical terms of speech, thought, and action, certain registers have proved especially hard to escape, as becomes evident when we contemplate replacing Du Bois’s central metaphor with some other sensory register, such as “second smell” or “second taste.” The ongoing challenge, it seems to me, is how to put these insights together, to create an analytical synthesis in which we think beyond ocularcentrism in framing questions and mining sources while accounting for the determinative power of vision throughout modern U.S. history.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Cullen Rath, “Echo and Narcissus: The Afrocentric Pragmatism of W. E. B. Du Bois,” *Journal of American History*, 84 (Sept. 1997), 461–95; Paul Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham, 2001).