Visuality

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WE all see differently. The properties of eyes vary from one person to another—and the messages that are transmitted from the retina to the brain shift accordingly. Some of us are shortsighted; some longsighted; some colorblind. We may spend a long time contemplating a painting or a landscape; flick rapidly through many images on a screen. Our eyes change as we age. We use a range of optical prostheses to aid us—spectacles, microscopes, telescopes. Seeing, however, is not just an ocular process. It involves interpretation: interpretation that is dependent upon our personal experiences, our social positioning, our inherent biases, and the language available to us when it comes to translating what we register visually into words. Different visual and verbal protocols accompany this assessment, depending on whether we are observing Royal Academy paintings, or family photographs, or postage stamps; trying to decipher cartoons and visual humor; scrutinizing faces, clouds, or skin color; reading diagrams or graphs. Nor does the eye work alone, but in combination with the senses of touch and smell and taste. Furthermore, we may be acutely aware of being the object of scrutiny as well as the person who does the looking. To look, in other words, is, to a greater or lesser degree, to exercise power—yet except in exceptional circumstances, the looked-upon individual has the ability to look back, and to reverse these dynamics, or, at the very least, to see things from another perspective. That last phrase reminds one, of course, how readily the language of sight slides from the literal to the metaphoric.

All of these variables may be herded together under the term "visuality." This noun, I maintain, does not easily lend itself to a clear definition—"visuality is . . . " Rather, it is best seen as an abstract word, a portmanteau word, housing the physiological and neurobiological practices of seeing; optical technologies that permit us to observe in greater detail, or to record and transmit *what* we see; and the discourse, cultural habits and practices of viewing that allow us to understand what we see. Under that overarching rubric of "visuality," we should also add in the historically constituted place-and-culture-dependent skill sets that are brought to the act of looking—what Michael Baxandall, in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972), influentially termed the "period eye."[1] *How* people in the past saw; what conditioned their interpretation of what they saw; what mediated what they saw—such questions are not limited to historians of art and visual culture, but exercise us all.

So, what might we think of as being particularly important to Victorian visuality—at once a complicated term, implying aesthetic production and protocols for seeing over some seven decades, and our own modes of contact with the thick remnants of the Victorian visual world? I'd isolate four things. First, the broadening opportunities to see constructed images: a result of the growth in mechanical reproduction (photographs, engravings, halftone reproductions, as seen in periodicals, books, posters), of civic engagement (museums, art galleries, public statues and memorials, stained glass and murals, exhibitions of fine arts, industry, and design), and of commercial and consumerist activity (shop windows, fashion, advertisements). Such images broadened Victorian visual knowledge on a global scale. Second, a preoccupation (especially among the middle classes) with new optical technologies. These provoked self-consciousness about vision's variability and about the slippage between illusion and reality: I'd include here stereoscopes, cinematic forerunners like the zoetrope and the praxinoscope (and of course early film itself), magic lantern shows, and elaborate theatrical transformations. Thirdly, the rise in popular aesthetics, and how the ideas of, above all, John Ruskin, and then William Morris and other Arts and Crafts theorists fed into the appearance of the ordinary lived environment, from domestic interiors to railway stations. Finally, the commitment of these particular writers to the aesthetics of the natural world joined with that of scientific popularizers and naturalists to encourage more attentive environmental observation, whether of plants or beetles, gardens or mountains, or the daily sky.

Everything said so far is predicated on the assumption that there is some material object or set of objects to be looked at. I've deliberately left until last one further aspect of visuality—its engagement with the physiologically *in*visible. I'm here not so much thinking about that which is in darkness, in shadow, or underground, or the processes of revelation and illumination, achieved through such artificial means as electric lighting of streets and homes. Yet, the connection of visuality with that which is invisible to the seeing eye is the sense in which the word was initially coined, seemingly by Thomas Carlyle, in *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1841) to describe the structural and imaginative achievement of Dante's *Divine Comedy*—"every compartment of it is worked out, with intense earnestness, into truth, into clear visuality."[2] Carlyle's usage suggests that we visualize things as we read of them or hear of them—in our mind's eye. Mid-Victorian physiological commentators, including Alexander Bain and George Henry Lewes, were fascinated

by our capacity to make mental pictures, both consciously and—a topic of wide and perennial interest—in dreams. The 1863 translation of Emanuel Swedenborg's *Arcana Cœlestia* (1749–56) further pushes the claims of internal vision by writing of "the visuality of the internal man, which sees from the light of heaven."[3] The importance of imaginative visualization is inseparable from the penning and reading of literary texts.

One consequence of the fact that the term "visuality" was not widely employed by the Victorians—although Carlyle himself repeated it in various contexts—is that using it can seem like imposing a much more recent set of theoretical assumptions. Yet it's important to realize that all the components that we now cluster under the rubric of "visuality" were, indeed, not just present to the Victorians, but were endlessly discussed by them in terms that have become formative to the questions we ask of the Victorian period today, and as we reconstruct, so far as we can, how the Victorians may have seen their world.

Notes

1. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy. A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 29.
2. Thomas Carlye, "The Hero as Poet," in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History. Six Lectures*, 2nd ed. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1842), 144.
3. Emanuel Swedenborg, *Arcana Cœlestia. The Heavenly Mysteries contained in the Holy Scripture, or Word of the Lord, Unfolded*, 12 vols. (London: The Swedenborg Society, 1863), 7: 94.

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SURVEYING work on Victorian visual culture for this journal twenty years ago, Kevin Z. Moore suggested: "there was no coherent politics of vision in the nineteenth century; there was only an explosion of visual devices and their uses by whoever had the wherewithal to put them to