One of the most important nineteenth-century developments in the history of perception was the relatively sudden emergence of models of subjective vision in a wide range of disciplines during the period 1810–1840. Dominant discourses and practices of vision, within the space of a few decades, effectively broke with a classical regime of visuality and grounded the truth of vision in the density and materiality of the body.1 One of the consequences of this shift was that the functioning of vision became dependent on the complex and contingent physiological makeup of the observer, rendering vision faulty, unreliable, and, it was sometimes argued, arbitrary. Even before the middle of the century, an extensive amount of work in science, philosophy, psychology, and art involved a coming to terms in various ways with the understanding that vision, or any of the senses, could no longer claim an essential objectivity or certainty. By the 1860s, the scientific work of Hermann von Helmholtz, Gustav Fechner, and many others had defined the contours of a general epistemological uncertainty in which perceptual experience had lost the primal guarantees that once upheld its privileged relation to the foundation of knowledge. This book examines some of the components of a cultural environment in which these new truths and new uncertainties about perception were being contested and reconstructed, within both visual modernism and a modernizing mass visual culture, beginning in the late 1870s.

The idea of subjective vision—the notion that our perceptual and sensory experience depends less on the nature of an external stimulus than on the composition and functioning of our sensory apparatus—was one of the conditions for the historical emergence of notions of autonomous vision, that is, for a severing (or liberation) of perceptual experience from a necessary relation to an exterior world. Equally important, the rapid accumulation of knowledge about the workings of a fully embodied observer disclosed possible ways that vision was open to procedures of normalization, of quantification, of discipline. Once the empirical truth of vision was determined to lie in the body, vision (and similarly the other senses) could be annexed and controlled by external techniques of manipulation and stimulation. This was the decisive achievement of the science of psychophysics in the mid-nineteenth century, which, by apparently rendering sensation measurable, embedded human perception in the domain of the quantifiable and the abstract. Vision, conceived in this way, became compatible with many other processes of modernization, even as it also opened up the possibility of visual experience that was intrinsically nonrationalizable, that exceeded any procedures of normalization. These developments are part of a critical historical turning point in the second half of the nineteenth century at which any significant qualitative difference between life and technics begins to evaporate. The disintegration of an indisputable distinction between interior and exterior becomes a condition for the emergence of spectacular modernizing culture and for a dramatic expansion of the possibilities of aesthetic experience. The relocation of perception (as well as processes and functions previously assumed to be “mental”) in the thickness of the body was a precondition for the instrumentalizing of human vision as a component of machinic arrangements; but it also stands behind the astonishing burst of visual invention and experimentation in European art in the second half of the nineteenth century.

More specifically since the late nineteenth century, and increasingly during the last two decades, capitalist modernity has generated a constant re-creation of the conditions of sensory experience, in what could be called a revolutionizing of the means of perception. For the last 100 years perceptual modalities have been and continue to be in a state of perpetual transformation, or, some might claim, a state of crisis. If vision can be said to have any enduring characteristic within the twentieth century, it is that it has no enduring features. Rather it is embedded in a pattern of adaptability to new technological relations, social configurations, and economic imperatives. What we familiarly refer to, for example, as film, photography, and television are transient elements within an accelerating sequence of displacements and obsolescences, part of the delirious operations of modernization.