

INTRODUCTION

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In Essay XII, Book II of his *Essais*, first published in 1580, Michel de Montaigne posed the question ‘Que sçay-je?’ What do I know? It was not a question of quantity – which piece of information he might possess. As he made clear in the “Apology for Raymond Sebond”, the key word in that question was the verb, know. At the end of roughly a century, which had begun with Columbus’s ‘discovery’, he asked whether one could know anything at all. He had been witness to many of the challenges: the bitter and violent confrontations between Huguenots and Catholics over revealed truth; conflicting accounts of peoples and cultures across bodies of water; the smashing of images in churches; the disconnect between Pliny’s system of visual organization of the natural world and unimagined animals, plants, and peoples. Between the arrival of Columbus’s first letters and the death of Étienne de la Boétie, European eyes had been at the center. Discovery, iconoclasm, revelation, observation all presumed some kind of a direct relationship between the human eye and knowledge. And as Montaigne detailed so carefully, none took into account either the subjectivity of the eye or the role of prior knowledge in shaping what the eye could see.

In the seventeenth century, Descartes sought to formulate a durable answer to Montaigne’s question, and Cartesianism – in which the mind is construed as a thing apart from body or things ‘external’ to the mind – seemed for three centuries to hold.¹ In the twentieth century, Cartesianism came under widespread and substantial criticism, opening new questions of perspective, the subjectivity of any epistemology, the role of images in cognition, and the relationship of body and mind.

Those questions have been taken up with particular fertility in the study of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Scholars in anthropology and ethnography, art history, geography and cartography, history, history of science, and national literatures have explored with deepening sophistication and sensitivity what might broadly be called the

¹ Rorty R., *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: 1979).

subjective eye. In 1972, Michael Baxandall posited the notion of ‘the period eye’: the ways in which the perception of visual values – such as scale, perspective, texture, color, and line – was dialectically intertwined with contemporary social relations and economic practices.² In 1982, Anthony Pagden took up early modern ethnography and the categories, drawn predominantly from classical texts, Europeans brought to bear on their ‘witnessing’.³ In 1992, Stephen Greenblatt linked a growing body of work on wonder with the burgeoning study of the Columbian ‘encounter’.⁴ In 1994, Stuart Schwarz published a collection of essays on European ‘visions’ of other peoples, those peoples’ ‘visions’ of Europeans, blurring distinctions between ‘perception’ and ‘observation’.⁵

While Baxandall’s conception of the ‘period eye’ had repercussions for work on Europeans’ perceptions of the peoples of the Americas and elsewhere, penetrating scholarship on observation and perception, he was himself engaged with the interplay of eye and made object. He belonged to an extraordinary generation of art historians who returned to familiar images, who sought to move past the categories of analysis in which they had been trained – schools and masters, technique and realism – to explore a far more complex dialectic of eye and object. In 1965, Sixton Ringbom explored the relationship between what he called ‘pictorial forms’ and religious devotion.⁶ In 1983, Svetlana Alpers challenged the criteria by which, in particular, images produced in the early modern Netherlands had been viewed and judged, arguing for an ‘art of describing’, as discrete from an Italian narrative art.⁷ So,

² See, for example, Baxandall M., *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy; a Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: 1972; second edition, Oxford: 1988); and idem, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany, 1475–1525: Images and Circumstances* (New Haven: 1980). On Baxandall’s influence, see Langdale A., “Aspects of the Critical Reception and Intellectual History of Baxandall’s Concept of the Period Eye”, *Art History* 21(1998) 479–497. For a close exploration of Baxandall’s method and concepts, see Baker M., “Limewood, Chiromancy and Narratives of Making. Writing about the materials and processes of sculpture”, *Art History* 21(1998) 498–530.

³ Pagden A., *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: 1982).

⁴ Greenblatt S., *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: 1992); Greenblatt S. (ed.), *New World Encounters* (Berkeley: 1993).

⁵ Schwarz S., *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge: 1994).

⁶ Ringbom S., *Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-Up in Fifteenth-century Devotional Painting* (originally published in *Acta Academiae Aboensis*, Ser. A.; Second edition, Doornspijk: 1984).

⁷ Alpers S., *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: 1983).

too, in 1983, Norman Bryson argued for a mutually informing interplay, a 'logic', between an image and what he called 'the gaze'.⁸ In 1990, Martin Kemp took up the ways in which images reflected and depicted the principles of optics operating in a particular society at a particular time, linking, as he said, science and art, in shared theories about the operating of the human eye.⁹

At once echoing and separate from this work in art history, a group of map historians began to explore maps as something made to shape perception, in this instance, of space.¹⁰ In 1987, J.B. Harley and David Woodward published the first volume of *The History of Cartography: Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean*.¹¹ In the very title, the two intended to mark a shift, from a history of maps to something far more complex. They and their contributors approached maps as complex cultural artifacts, which, at the simplest level, enabled them to include under the rubric 'map' a range of different kinds of images and objects. At a deeper level, that way of speaking about maps invited scholars of Asia, Latin America, Africa, and pre-modern periods to explore what certain cultural objects were seeking to 'represent', following Harley, through a system of signs that particular culture accepted as conventional.

Inspired in part by Walter Ong's work on the transition to print in the early modern period,¹² historians explored the printed page as a seen object that itself shapes modes of cognition. In a series of essays, originally presented in the 1970s, collected and published in 1987, Roger Chartier explored the ways in which print – not simply texts, but their material form and its visualities – shaped thinking.¹³ Since

⁸ Bryson N., *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: 1983).

⁹ Kemp M., *The Science of Art: Optical Themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat* (New Haven: 1990).

¹⁰ One of the earliest to explore maps in this way was J.B. Harley, who began his career working on English survey maps, and whose earliest engagements with the problem of 'representation' took up the political functions of maps. See Harley J.B., *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography*, Paul Laxton (ed.), (Baltimore and London: 2001).

¹¹ (Chicago: 1987).

¹² Ong W., *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: 1958); idem, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: 1967).

¹³ Chartier R., *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, Lydia G. Cochrane (trans.), (Princeton: 1987). Another group of scholars, influenced by Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: 1962), took up the printing press as a technological revolution. See foremost, Eisenstein E., *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: 1979).

1987, Chartier has refined and extended his argument, detailing the ways in which the particular materialities of the codex or the physicalities of the print medium – front to back, right to left, columns, paragraphs, the spacing of words – have implications for how human beings organize as well as articulate their knowledge.¹⁴

Working in a number of different disciplines and along a number of different lines of inquiry, these scholars have called into question key terms in our thinking about the eye: the ‘objectivity’ of such visual values as perspective and balance; the relationship between observation or witnessing and subjectivity; the ways in which ‘representation’ implicates the eye of the beholder.

In the wake of their work, ‘perspective’ can be understood simultaneously as a system of signs arising in a mercantile culture and a way of conceptualizing individual sight. Perspective as system of converging lines situates the viewer in relationship to a two-dimensional image. At the same time, scholarship on the Columbian encounter/exchange situated perspective, physically, in persons it treated as members of historically specific cultures: sixteenth-century Europe, Aztec, Inca.

That scholarship enriched our thinking about ‘representation’ even more. In focusing attention on the words Europeans abroad chose to name what they said was before their eyes, scholarship on the ‘new world’ challenged any understanding of representation as something transparent or single-dimensional.¹⁵ Even as that group of scholars complicated representation as a relationship between words and the seen world, a separate group of scholars, following Ringbom’s work, began bringing to bear on their analysis of devotional art the lens of contemporary theology. They drew upon a very different vocabulary to reconceptualize ‘representation’ in a culture that had so richly grappled with the doctrine of the Incarnation and its implications for made objects.¹⁶ Historians of cartography have argued persuasively that two- and three-dimensional ‘representations’ of the earth and the globe, of geographic space and human place,¹⁷ are equally epistemo-

¹⁴ Chartier R., *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Cochrane L.G. (trans.) (Stanford: 1994); idem, *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances, and Audiences from Codex to Computer* (Philadelphia: 1995).

¹⁵ See, for example, Adorno R., *Guaman Poma: Writing and Resistance in Colonial Peru* (Austin: 1986).

¹⁶ One of the earliest such works was Miles M., *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: 1985).

¹⁷ On the distinction between these two concepts, see foremost, Tuan Y., *Space and*

logically complex, at once drawing upon a system of signs that are conventional in order to shape perception of space.

Even as this scholarship was first complicating our understanding of the relationship between the eye and object or other person – observation, witnessing, viewing, perception – and demonstrating the inadequacy of any simple model of ‘reception’, David Lindberg published *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler*.¹⁸ Gathering diverse theories of the anatomy of the eye, the physiology of the visual system, the mathematical principles of perspective and the psychology of visual perception together, Lindberg documented the plethora of modes of thinking about sight prior to Kepler’s theory of the retinal image. Lindberg’s careful descriptions of individual theories revealed not simply the absence of any single unified theory of optics prior to Kepler, but how very differently classical, Arabic, medieval, and early modern theorists of vision conceptualized the eye, the mechanics of sight, the mathematics of perspective, and visual perception.

In particular, Lindberg detailed distinctive theories of intromission – in which the object, which exists outside the eye somehow enters the eye, often through ‘species’ or lines of sight – and extramission – in which the eye reached out to the seen object in some way. In these theories, scholars found another set of conceptual coordinates to understand better early modern theories of perspective, representation, and the image and ways of conceiving visual cognition that moved past the model that currently underlies most work on modern vision. The notion that images entered the eye and through the eye, the mind, opened new ways of approaching first devotional images, and then other sorts of visible objects. While modern studies of visual culture and vision were normally built upon modern optics’ model of the organism, early modern scholarship could explore alternative ways of conceptualizing what might be called visual cognition, in which made objects and the human eye were bound up together in a complex dynamic.

The models of the eye and of visual cognition delineated in Lindberg’s work also offered news ways of thinking about ‘the invisible’, both as an early modern concept and as a judgment modern scholars

Place: The Perspective of Experience (Minneapolis: 1977); Sack R.D., *Conceptions of Space in Social Thought: A Geographic Perspective* (Minneapolis: 1980); idem, *Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History* (Cambridge: 1986).

¹⁸ Lindberg D., *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (Chicago: 1976).

had applied to early modern phenomena. Herbert Kessler, Klaus Krüger, Christine Göttler, and other art historians have explored the ways in which medieval and early modern artists sought to ‘picture’ (Kessler’s term) or to make of the image a veil of the invisible (Krüger) or render in matter ‘unseen spirits’ (Göttler).¹⁹ In each of these studies, scholars drew upon a more complex conceptualization of visual cognition in order to explore the ways in which ‘images’ engaged through their materialities with that which, according to early modern Europeans, could not be seen. While eschewing Lindberg’s argument for the plurality of models of visual perception, Stuart Clark has drawn upon Lindberg’s argument for those models’ essential difference from modern theories of optics to explore early modern notions of ‘vision’, primarily demonic and fantastic.²⁰ Each of these scholars has brought new layers to our understanding of ‘vision’ and ‘the invisible’, and their relationship to cognition.

In the expanding interdisciplinarity of the past two decades this work was read in turn by people working in other disciplines and on other kinds of artifacts. That cross fertilization, which is very much evident in the essays collected in this volume, is leading to a wonderfully rich conceptualization of the human eye. Among early modernists, the eye links images and exploration, representation and the theology of Incarnation, optics and perspective, observation and cartography. That eye was the focus of a conference Walter Melion, Neil Whitehead, and I organized in 2006. The scholars we brought together came from anthropology and ethnography, art history, English and French literature, history of science, and history. Denis Cosgrove was to participate until his health made that impossible. His presence, I believe, is still visible in the work of a number of the contributors.

Even as I invoked ‘the human eye’, however, the work in this volume demonstrates there is not one ‘early modern eye’, but many eyes.

¹⁹ Kessler H., *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God’s Invisibility in Medieval Art* (Philadelphia: 2000); Krüger K., *Das Bild als Schleier des Unsichtbaren: Ästhetische Illusion in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit in Italien* (Munich: 2001); Göttler C., “Preface: Vapours and Veils: The Edge of the Unseen”, in Göttler C. and Neuber W. (eds.), *Spirits Unseen: The Representation of Subtle Bodies in Early Modern European Culture* (Leiden: 2008) *Intersections. Yearbook of Early Modern Studies* 9, xv–xxvii. Much of this also draws upon work on the relationship between images and cognition in medieval thought. See foremost, Caruthers M., *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: 1990).

²⁰ Clark S., *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford: 2007).

At one level, as many of these papers suggest, there was no shared visual education, not among Christians in Europe, not imposed by Europeans on subject colonial peoples. At another level, as Walter Melion suggests in his study of Peter Canisius's *De Maria Virgine*, within the continent of Europe, even among those who called themselves Catholic, there was no clear consensus, what the relationship between the human eye and the made object was – even as Canisius sought to shape what it should be. As Tom Conley suggests, sixteenth-century Europeans took up small and subtle visual cues to differentiate ways of seeing we are still in the process of delineating.

The following articles take up such diverse artifacts as a Jesuit mariological text, cosmographies, Calvin's *Institutes*, Las Casas's *Apologia*, Hans Staden's Testimony, and the Codex Telleriano-Remensis. The sheer breadth of sources – from a guide for reading Scripture, through the testimony of a captive, to an illuminated manuscript produced in a Spanish colony – offers a kind of panopticon of the different venues in which early modern persons engaged with questions of the eye. Each object, text, artifact offers a different angle of approach, a different lens through which we might consider the eye. Each is, at the same time, a distinctive site in which questions of witnessing, perception, representation, cognition and the visual intersect uniquely.

The articles in this volume are not organized according to broad themes. They intersect and resonate with one another at a number of levels, resisting the efforts of an editor to sort them into clean categories. That, too, is one of the legacies of interdisciplinarity: the slow, and one might add, natural erosion of ancient boundaries that served to organize, here, a book. Instead, let me suggest here some of the intersections that link these articles. When read together, these articles resonate with one another, deepening the insights of one another through the reverberations, the echoes, of methods, terms, points of entry.

Witnessing and Representation: Neil Whitehead and José Rabasa explore the interplay of witnessing and translation in two very different artifacts. Whitehead draws upon his training as an ethnographer to explore the tension between Hans Staden's efforts to communicate the authenticity as well as the strangeness of his experience of the Tupi, and in particular, their anthropophagy, on the one hand, and, on the other, the woodcut illustrations of his Testimony, which negotiated visually between conventional signs and the unfamiliarity of what von Staden was claiming to have witnessed. Rabasa takes up a very different sort of artifact, the Codex Telleriano-Remensis, a manuscript illuminated

by a native artist, for the complexity of the witnessing there rendered in line, color, and sign. In so doing, he reveals a multi-layered interplay between subjectivity and sight. Michel Weemans interrogates ‘the spectator’ and with it, the act of visual exegesis, as they are instantiated in Herri met de Bles’s “Landscape with David and Bathsheba”.

Visual Epistemologies: Tom Conley analyzes images that accompanied Gilles Corrozet’s *Hécatomgraphie* and different editions of Pieter Apian’s *Cosmographia* as they reveal different ways of conceptualizing, as well as perceiving, oneself in the abstract space of the globe and the specific space of topography. Nicolás Wey-Gómez interrogates Bartholomé de Las Casas’ conception of optics and its role in his effort to locate the cultures and peoples of the Americas within certain referents and not others.

Vision: Walter Melion explicates the image theory of Peter Canisius’s *De Maria Virgine*, a text which sought to use images to shape both inner vision and perception of outward religious practice. My own piece takes up John Calvin and Michel de Montaigne and their critique of the models of eye and brain upon which natural theology rested.

In bringing together work on optic theory, ethnography, the visual cultures of Christianity, cosmography and topography, the volume hopes to offer a sense of the richness and the complexity of early modern thinking about the human eye. In bringing together discussions of vision, representation, witnessing, and the relationship between vision and knowledge, it hopes to restore something of the complexity of their intersections in the early modern world.

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