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Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture

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The intellectual historian Martin Jay once championed the cause of ?ocular-*ec*centricity? as an alternative mode of visual engagement.(1) The term, of course, was a play on ?ocularcentricity?, the concept that the rational power of the eye had come to dominate the nature and scope of our interactions. In recent decades, scholars have often argued that a rise in visual certitude and corresponding charges of the totalising power of vision were coincident with the advent of linear perspective, and viewership techniques facilitated by the *camera obscura*.(2)

In *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture*, however, Stuart Clark presents a strikingly different story. He claims that intellectual experience during the period between the 1430s and the 1670s was marked not by ocular hegemony, but intense visual crisis. In effect, the act of looking was perceived by viewers as almost never straightforward, and rarely to be trusted. This early modern crisis of confidence in the eye was all the more severe for its participants because it occurred within a paradigm dominated by vision. This twist is of particular significance for historians because it allows ?ocular-*ec* centricity? and ?ocularcentricity? to exist literally couched within each other. Clark?s latest study, then, can be read not as a rejection of previous scholarship on the power of the eye, but rather a compelling complication of it.

Clark borrows both the title and subject of *Vanities of the Eye* from a 1608 treatise by the Oxford intellectual

George Hakewill. Following Hakewill?s lead, Clark devotes his study to exploring the three categories of vision that he identified as natural, artificial and demonic. Clark is the first, to my knowledge, to provide a serious assessment of the latter category. This should in itself mark the book as a noteworthy read for those concerned with understanding the complexities of visual culture. Drawing upon over two decades of research on the intellectual history of demonology, he is perhaps in a singular position to explore this topic. At 400 pages, *Vanities* weighs in at only half the size of Clark?s *Thinking With Demons* (1997). However, the volume is nonetheless substantial in depth and scope. Clark builds his study thematically, weaving together examples that span much of Europe. The broad range of research encompassed within the book will provide much of further value to readers with widespread interests in early modern intellectual, religious and cultural history, as well as art history, and the history of science, technology and medicine.

In the opening chapter, Clark locates the foundation of early modern visual theory within an Aristotelian model that privileged sight over the experience of the other senses. The doctrine of visual *species* established the expectation that seeing was a clear, rational and consistent process. However, Clark observes that the powerful nature of the eye rendered it particularly vulnerable to errors of misapprehension and moral corruption that betrayed ?how ambiguously sight was regarded in an already ocularcentric age? (p. 5). Hakewill fretted, for example, that an entire catalogue of sins ranging from ?wantonness? and ?idolatry? to ?contempt, envy, and witchcraft? could be traced directly to the eyes? inherent vanity (p. 25).

In the three chapters that follow, Clark describes how the categories of images identified by Hakewill were produced, experienced and manipulated in terms of visual *species*. In ?Fantasies? (chapter 2) he begins by exploring the impact of the viewer?s bodily state on the content of what he or she perceived. Vision might be altered somewhat predictably, for example, by the distorting effects of eye diseases such as cataracts. Clark notes, however, that sight was equally vulnerable to disturbances produced by the unsound mental condition of the observer, which could be traced to imbalances within the faculty of the imagination. As an intermediary between the senses and the intellect, the imagination operated on distinctly visual terms. Humoral imbalances affecting its state could result in particularly vivid delusions, such as the graphically distorted self-perceptions entertained by melancholics and lycanthropes. Notably, these and many later examples emphasise that visual engagement was not necessarily bound to the realm of visible experience. Sight, in effect, did not require the existence of a corresponding object to be seen.

In ?Prestiges? (chapter 3) Clark outlines the array of techniques employed by jugglers and artists to ?bind? the eyes of their observers. He notes that although commentators sometimes associated the category of ?prestige? with artless duping, many also stressed the sophistication necessary to master such illusions. Optical effects, for example, were an important component of artificial magic because they sought to emulate and extend upon spectacles produced in the natural world through the additional aid of lenses and mathematics. In a fresh twist, Clark considers the relationship between the discovery of linear perspective and the crafts of the magician. He observes that this important artistic innovation coincided historically with a growing vogue for natural magic (p. 83). As well, provocatively, Francis Bacon chose to include both ?perspective houses? and ?houses of deceits of the senses? among the specialised research centres that he envisioned in the *New Atlantis* (p. 78). Clark concludes that, at the very least, the geometrical construction of convincing three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface drew attention to the image?s own paradoxical status, in a manner similar in effect to the deceptive handiwork of the prestige. His remarks, however, remain largely speculative on this very intriguing topic.

In ?Glamours?, a chapter drawing upon his extensive previous research, Clark describes the ease with which demons effected havoc on the visual world. In fact the devil was popularly believed to have the ability to intervene at any stage within the sequence of natural processes that constituted human vision, extending from the manipulation of *species* passing through the air, to the disturbance of humours within the brain. The disruptive power of these dissimulations was all the greater because the devil so often employed them to turn reality on its head. Clark notes that demonic visions provided an important framework also for accounts of witchcraft. The devil might choose to generate visual doubles of the bodies of witches, for example, thereby allowing them to attend the sabbat while simultaneously appearing home in bed (p. 144).

Significantly, within both preternatural vision, and its natural and artificial counterparts, the boundary between image production and image perception was fundamentally blurred. Anamorphic portraits painted by artists, for example, popped into visibility only with the proper positioning of the eye of an outside observer. The eye itself, however, might be worked over to such an extent that its very capacity for vision was equally the product of an outside hand. Similarly, the ability to differentiate between active and passive participation became complicated, such that it was nearly impossible to tell the difference between the experience of looking, and that of being made to see. Calling on the voices of art historians Norman Bryson (pp. 6?7) and Erwin Panofsky (pp. 85?6), Clark stresses that the experience of vision is most fully understood by considering it as a social and intellectual phenomenon. Bryson, for example, insisted that we must consider that the entire world of social discourse entered between the mind?s eye and the picture plane. The degree of uncertainty and potential for dissimulation within Clark?s presentation seems to endow early modern sight with something of a Machiavellian flavour.

Importantly for Clark?s narrative, the ability to distinguish falsehood from reality on purely visual grounds was fundamentally shaken within each of the categories of vision. In the second five chapters of *Vanities of the Eye*, he demonstrates the degree to which radical uncertainty extended across diverse instances of visual experience ranging from the perception of ghosts and spectres (chapter 6), to the prophesies of kings (chapter 7), to the dreams of the sleeping (chapter 9). These well-crafted examples each serve to reiterate the pervasive nature of viewerly confusion throughout the period, and draw attention to the pressing status of images within significant topics of religious, philosophical and moral debate. In the chapter titled ?Images? (chapter 5), for example, Clark explores the contested status of graven likeness within debates sparked by the Protestant Reformation. Assessment of the power and place of visual resemblance was essential not only to deciding the kinds of paintings that could adorn the walls of churches, but more essentially the basic integrity of visual content within all forms of perception. Protestants were quick to stress, for example, that the appearance of contemporary miracles could be attributed to mundane bits of priestly trickery. Anti-Catholic pamphlets exposed the theatrical hoaxes of monks and friars, whose high jinks ranged from the application of dabs of vermillion paint to replicate stigmata, to the wonderfully contrived performance of a holy woman from Leominster who made the host appear to fly into her mouth with the aid of a hidden string (p. 175).

The insecure status of visual appearance posed a danger because it was able to prompt viewers to mistake the false for the true. More disturbingly for theologians, perhaps, the confusion surrounding the propagation of images and the reliability of their perception was capable of causing viewers to dismiss spiritual truth as feigned apparition. This possibility was raised, for example, by the Zwinglian commentator, Ludwig Laveter, who observed that the Apostles? recognition of their own surprise and fear at the miracles they witnessed caused them to cast into temporary doubt even the status of the Resurrection (p. 211). Clark makes it clear that the profound ambiguity surrounding visual experience was remarkably at play in setting the terms of such high stakes doctrinal debates as the status of miracles, the existence of Purgatory, the practice of Mass and the reality of transubstantiation. The challenge of resolving these deeply polarising questions was in part compounded by the optical status of the involved images, which resisted easy answer.

The degree to which religious and philosophical problems hinged on visual dilemmas that lacked a clear solution left not only individual viewers but whole institutions of thought deeply vulnerable to their very core. In ?Seemings? (chapter 8) Clark turns readers? attention to the deep challenge to ocular coherence presented by the rise of philosophical scepticism beginning in the mid 16th century. Sceptics rejected the Aristotelian model of visible *species*, and in so doing sought to undermine the veridical nature of all human perception. Pyrrhonists, for example, inspired by their Greek predecessors, argued that differentiating between true and false visual experience was an impossible and thus moot project. These sceptics concluded that viewers must abandon claims to judgement, thereby limiting their assessment of the world to a comparison of perceptual differences (p. 270). This brand of radical uncertainty was viewed as a threat by Catholics and Protestants alike. In ?Dreams? (chapter 9) Clark argues that Pyrrhonist-style doubt was exemplified in queries posed by Montaigne and Descartes challenging the viewer?s ability accurately to distinguish between sleep and waking consciousness. Although ultimately supporting different kinds of

philosophical conclusions, Clark notes that both projects were alike in that they demanded a ?radical calling into question of assumptions about the truth, certainty, and objectivity of sensory knowledge? (p. 301).

In the final chapter, titled ?Signs?, Clark argues that the uniquely precarious experience of early modern visual culture came to an end precisely because it coincided with a distinct set of philosophical concerns and religious beliefs that had themselves shifted in focus. By the latter half of the 17th century, the challenge posed by sceptics had been absorbed into the projects of philosophers such as Hobbes and Descartes for whom questioning the status of information gleaned through the eyes remained an essential part of engaging with reality, but no longer posed a devastating challenge to it. Interest in the special power of optics and perspective to generate and distort images became similarly integrated into the broader pursuit of natural philosophy. By this period as well, secular explanations of dreams and hallucinations replaced theories that presupposed the direct involvement of the devil in daily human affairs (p. 329). Clark observes that even as ?de-rationalized? vision drew to a close, the new formulations that replaced it continued to grapple with similar questions (p. 331). Strands of continuity can be traced, for example, in the mixture of suspicion and delight with which 18th-century popular culture embraced magic lanterns and other optical wonders.

Interestingly, the field of visual culture, from which Clark?s recent book in part draws, has itself undergone a kind of crisis of confidence since its inception in the 1990s. In the decade that followed, many scholars moved away from specifically visual concerns, or returned to more traditional ones, often questioning the subject?s continued relevance as a hybrid area of research. Approaching the topic of visual experience as a relative latecomer, Clark has much to add. *Vanities of the Eye* offers readers a taste of the unexpected and fruitful complexities to be gained by turning a serious eye to the historical questions of sight.

The author is very happy to accept this review and does not wish to add any comments to it.

Notes

1. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (Berkeley, Calif., 1994), p. 591.Back to (1)
2. Stephen M. Straker, ?The eye made ?other?: Dürer, Kepler, and the mechanization of light and vision?, in *Science, Technology and Culture in Historical Perspective*, ed. Louis A. Knafla (Calgary, 1976).Back to (2)

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