Introduction

Even a rapid glance at the language we commonly use will demonstrate the ubiquity of visual metaphors. If we actively focus our attention on them, vigilantly keeping an eye out for those deeply embedded as well as those on the surface, we can gain an illuminating insight into the complex mirroring of perception and language. Depending, of course, on one's outlook or point of view, the prevalence of such metaphors will be accounted an obstacle or an aid to our knowledge of reality. It is, however, no idle speculation or figment of imagination to claim that if blinded to their importance, we will damage our ability to inspect the world outside and introspect the world within. And our prospects for escaping their thrall, if indeed that is even a foreseeable goal, will be greatly dimmed.

In lieu of an exhaustive survey of such metaphors, whose scope is far too broad to allow an easy synopsis, this opening paragraph should suggest how ineluctable the modality of the visual actually is, at least in our linguistic practice. I hope by now that you, optique lecteur, can see what I mean.1

1. There are some twenty-one visual metaphors in this paragraph, many of them embedded in words that no longer seem directly dependent on them. Thus, for example, vigilant is derived from the Latin vigilare, to watch, which in its French form veiller is the root of surveillance. Detectivate comes from the Latin monstrare, to show. Inspect, prospect, introspect (and other words like aspect or circumspect) all derive from the Latin specere, to look at or observe. Speculate has the same root. Scope comes from the Latin scopium, a translation of a Greek word for to look at or examine. Synopsis is from the Greek word for general view. These are latent or dead metaphors,
Other Western languages also contain a wealth of examples to buttress the point. No German, for instance, can miss the Augen in Augenblick or the Schau in Auseinandersetzung, nor can a Frenchman fail to hear the voir in both savoir and pouvoir. And if this is so with ordinary language, it is no less the case with the specialized languages intellectuals have designed to lift us out of the commonsensical understanding of the world around us. As Ian Hacking and Richard Rorty have recently emphasized, even Western philosophy at its most putatively disinterested and neutral can be shown to be deeply dependent on occluded visual metaphors.\(^2\)

In addition to the ocular permutation of language, there exists a wealth of what might be called visually imbued cultural and social practices, which may vary from culture to culture and epoch to epoch. Sometimes these can be construed in grandiose terms, such as a massive shift from an oral culture to a "chirographic" one based on writing and then a typographic one in which the visual bias of the intermediate stage is even more firmly entrenched.\(^3\) On a more modest level, anthropologists and sociologists have examined such visually fraught phenomena as the widespread belief in the evil eye, which has given rise to a no less popular series of countervailing apotropaic remedies.\(^4\) Somewhere in between, historians of technology have pondered the implications of our expanded capacity to see through such devices as the telescope, microscope, camera, or cinema. What has been called the expansion of our "exosomatic organs"\(^5\) has meant above all extending the range of our vision, compensating for its imperfections, or finding substitutes for its limited powers. These expansions have themselves been linked in complicated ways to the practices of surveillance and spectacle, which they often abet.

Because of the remarkable range and variability of visual practices, many commentators have been tempted, in ways that we will examine shortly, to claim certain cultures or ages have been "ocularcentric," or "dominated" by vision. For them, what may seem a function of our physiology or evolution is best understood in historical terms, with the obvious conclusion often drawn that we can reverse the effects of that domination. Anthropological evidence of radical variations in the intersensory mix of different cultures has been adduced to encourage such an outcome.\(^6\)

But as in so many other similar debates, the threshold between what is "natural" and what is "cultural" is by no means easy to fix with any certainty.

5. For recent studies of the evil eye, see Clarence Maloney, ed., The Evil Eye (New York, 1976); Lawrence Di Stasi, Mal Occhio: The Underside of Vision (San Francisco, 1981); and Tobin Siebers, The Mirror of Medusa (Berkeley, 1983). For an account of apotropaic responses to it, see Albert M. Potts, The World's Eye (Lexington, Ky., 1982).

6. Robert E. Innis, "Technics and the Bias of Perception," Philosophy and Social Criticism, 10, 1 (Summer, 1984), p. 67. Although visual "prostheses" appear to be the most significant extension of human sense organs, such inventions as the telephone, loudspeaker, stethoscope, and sonar demonstrate that hearing has also been exosomatically enhanced. The other senses have perhaps not been as fortunate.

7. As is the case with many neologisms, "ocularcentric" or "oculocentric" is sometimes spelled differently in the literature. Often it is rendered "oculocentric," or less frequently "ocularocentric." In previous publications I have followed the first of these usages and will remain with it here.

8. See, for example, the essays in David Hames, ed., The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses (Toronto, 1991).
tain. For example, the psychologists Michael Argyle and Mark Cook have recently concluded that "the use of the gaze in human social behavior does not vary much between cultures: it is a cultural universal." But the implications of the work of another psychologist, James Gibson, suggests otherwise. Gibson contrasts two basic visual practices, which produce what he calls "the visual world" and the "visual field." In the former, sight is ecologically intertwined with the other senses to generate the experience of "depth shapes," whereas in the latter, sight is detached by fixating the eyes to produce "projected shapes" instead. A plate, for example, will be experienced as round in the visual world, but as an ellipse in the visual field, where the rules of perspectival representation prevail. The implication of Gibson's argument is that vision is normally crossed with the other senses, but it can be artificially separated out. Thus, cultures might be differentiated according to how radically they distinguish between the visual field and the visual world.

But whether we identify the latter with "natural" vision is not self-evident. In a series of essays, the philosopher Marx Warofsky has argued for a radically culturalist reading of all visual experience, including Gibson's two dominant modes. Alternately talking about "visual postures," "visual scenarios," "styles of seeing," or "cultural optics," he concludes that "human vision is itself an artifact, produced by other artifacts, namely pictures." All perception, he contends, is the result of historical changes in representation. Warofsky thus presents an intentionalist account of visuality, which verges on making it a product of collective human will.

Judging from the current state of scientific research on sight, which helps in conceptualizing the "natural" capacities and limitations of the eye, Warofsky's hostility to any physiological explanation of human visual experience may, however, be excessive. Certain fairly fundamental characteristics seem to exist, which no amount of cultural mediation can radically alter. As a diurnal animal standing on its hind legs, the early human being developed its sensorium in such a way as to give sight an ability to differentiate and assimilate most external stimuli in a way superior to the other four senses. Smell, which is so important for animals on

9. Michael Argyle and Mark Cook, Gaze and Mutual Gaze (Cambridge, 1976), p. 169. It should be noted that they use the term "gaze" in a general sense to mean any kind of visual interaction. Unlike some of the authors cited later, they do not contrast it with the less fixating glance.


14. The anthropologist Edward T. Hall has conjectured that even before hominids stood on their hind legs, vision was important. "Originally a ground-dwelling animal, man's ancestor was forced by interspecies competition and changes in the environment to desert the ground and take to the trees. Arboreal life calls for keen vision and decreases dependence on smell, which is crucial for terrestrial organisms. Thus
all fours, was reduced in importance, a fateful transformation that Freud was to conjecture was the very foundation of human civilization.\textsuperscript{15} Vision was the last of the human senses to develop fully, its very complexity always proving a difficult case for incremental theories of evolution. It also remains the last of the senses to develop in the fetus, only in fact gaining its true importance for the survival of the neonate some time after birth.\textsuperscript{16} The infant, it is sometimes argued, experiences a synesthetic confusion of the senses without vision fully differentiated from the rest. Smell and touch are apparently more functionally vital than sight at this very early stage of development.

With the maturation of the child, however, the superior capacity of the eyes to process certain kinds of data from without is soon established. Having some eighteen times more nerve endings than the cochlear nerve of the ear, its nearest competitor, the optic nerve with its 800,000 fibers is able to transfer an astonishing amount of information to the brain, and at a rate of assimilation far greater than that of any other sense organ. In each eye, over 120 million rods take in information on some five hundred levels of lightness and darkness, while more than seven million cones allow us to distinguish among more than one million combinations of color. The eye is also able to accomplish its tasks at a far greater remove than any other sense, hearing and smell being only a distant second and third.\textsuperscript{17}

Despite the frequent characterization of vision as atemporal and static, the eye can only do its job by being in almost constant motion. Either it

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17. According to Hall, "Up to twenty feet the ear is very efficient. At about one hundred feet, one-way vocal communication is possible, at a somewhat slower rate than at conversational distances, while a two-way conversation is very considerably altered. Beyond this distance, the auditory cues with which man works begin to break down rapidly. The unaided eye, on the other hand, sweeps up an extraordinary amount of information within a hundred-yard radius and is still quite efficient for human interaction at a mile" (The Hidden Dimension, p. 43).


not yet fully understood. Indeed, with all the advances science has made in explaining human vision, its complexities are such that many questions remain unanswered. Significantly, attempts to duplicate it through computer simulation have met so far with only very modest success.21

If the eye’s powers are appreciated by science, so too are its limitations. Human vision can see light waves that are only a fraction of the total spectrum—in fact, less than 1 percent with such phenomena as ultraviolet light, visible to other species, excluded.22 In addition, the human eye has a blind spot where the optic nerve connects with the retina. Normally ignored because the vision of the other eye compensates for it, the blind spot’s existence nonetheless suggests a metaphoric “hole” in vision, which, as we will have ample occasion to witness, critics of ocularcentrism gleefully exploit. Human vision is also limited by its capacity to focus on objects only a certain distance from the eye, a distance that normally increases with age. Thus the eye’s superiority at sensing objects from afar is balanced by its inferiority at seeing those very close. Finally, we are often fooled by visual experience that turns out to be illusory, an inclination generated perhaps by our overwhelming, habitual belief in its apparent reliability. Here the compensating sense is usually touch, as we seek confirmation through direct physical contact.

One final aspect of the contemporary natural scientific understanding of vision merits comment. Unlike the other senses of smell, touch, or taste, there seems to be a close, if complicated, relationship between sight and language, both of which come into their own at approximately the same moment of maturation. As Robert Rivlin and Karen Gravelle note, “The ability to visualize something internally is closely linked with the ability to describe it verbally. Verbal and written descriptions create highly specific mental images. . . . The link between vision, visual memory, and verbalization can be quite startling.”23 There is therefore something revealing in the ambiguities surrounding the word “image,” which can signify graphic, optical, perceptual, mental, or verbal phenomena.24

The implications of this final point are very significant for the problem noted earlier: the permeability of the boundary between the “natural” and the “cultural” component in what we call vision. Although perception is intimately tied up with language as a generic phenomenon, different peoples of course speak different tongues. As a result, the universality of visual experience cannot be automatically assumed, if that experience is in part mediated linguistically. Natural science, therefore, itself suggests the possibility of cultural variables, at least to some degree. It implies, in other words, the inevitable entanglement of vision and what has been called “visuality”—the distinct historical manifestations of visual experience in all its possible modes.25 Observation, to put it another way, means observing the tacit cultural rules of different scopic regimes.

The cultural variability of ocular experience will be even more evident if we consider it, as it were, from a different perspective. The eye, it has long been recognized, is more than the passive receptor of light and color. It is also the most expressive of the sense organs, with the only competitor being touch. Although the ancient theory of light rays emanating from the eye, the theory called extramission, has long since been discredited,26

23. Ibid., pp. 88–89. For a discussion of the complex interaction between vocal-auditory and gestural-visual channels of communication, see Argyle and Cook, p. 124.


25. For a discussion of the difference, see Hal Foster, ed., Vision and Visuality (Seattle, 1988), especially the editor’s preface.

26. Perhaps the belief in rays coming from the eye was due to the phenomenon of light shining off the eyeball through reflection, which is especially evident in certain animals. Descartes, as late as La Dioptrique, credited the cat with extramission for this reason. In 1704, however, an experiment showed that if a cat is immersed in water, the lack of corneal refraction prevents the eye from shining. See Smith, The Body, p. 380.
it expressed a symbolic truth. For the eye—broadly understood as including the complex of muscles, flesh, and even hair around the eyeball—can clearly project, signal, and emit emotions with remarkable power. Common phrases such as “a piercing or penetrating gaze,” “melting eyes,” “a come-hither look,” or “casting a cold eye” all capture this ability with striking vividness. Aided by its capacity to overflow with the tears necessary to bathe it with constant moisture, a capacity triggered by a multitude of different stimuli, some physical, some emotional (the latter found only in humans), the eye is not only, as the familiar clichés would have it, a “window on the world,” but also a “mirror of the soul.”

Even the dilation of the pupil can unintentionally betray an inner state, subtly conveying interest or aversion to the beholder.

There is, moreover, a learned ability to use the eyes to express something deliberately, a skill more sharply honed than in the case of the other senses. Ranging from the casual glance to the fixed glare, the eye can obey the conscious will of the viewer in a way denied the other more passive senses, once again the only competitor being touch with its ability to strangle as well as caress. The phenomenon of the evil eye, mentioned above, is only one manifestation of this potential for sending powerful messages. As a result, vision is often called “the censor of the senses... an arbiter of behavior, an inhibitor or stimulus thereto,” unlike the more accepting touch. Significantly, of all the animals, only man and the primates have the ability to use the gaze to send affiliative as well as threatening signals. Here scientists have conjectured that this ability may be a residue of our visually charged infant feeding position with the maternal look of love the key to later behavior.

Messages are only such, of course, if they are received, and one of the most extraordinary aspects of vision, most broadly conceived, is the experience of being the object of the look. Here the range of possibilities is exceptionally wide, extending from the paranoid's fantasy of being under constant hostile surveillance to the exhibitionist's narcissistic thrill at being the cynosure of all eyes. There can also be few human interactions as subtle as the dialectic of the mutual gaze, ranging from the contest for domination to the lovers' complementary adoration. Even not being the object of the look conveys a powerful message under certain circumstances, as any underling who has become an “invisible man” will quickly attest.

Terms such as paranoia, narcissism, and exhibitionism suggest how powerfully visual experience, both directed and received, can be tied to our psychological processes. In ways we will explore later, vision has been frequently linked by psychologists to the “normal” emotions of desire, curiosity, hostility, and fear. The remarkable ability of images originally construed as mimetic representations or aesthetic ornaments to be transformed into totemic objects of worship in their own right also bespeaks vision's power to evoke hypnotic fascination. And scopophilic and scopophobic inclinations have also been widely acknowledged as fundamental aspects of the human psyche.

With all of these dimensions to the phenomenon we call vision—and others can doubtless be added—it is no surprise that our ordinary language, indeed our culture as a whole, is deeply marked by its importance. An excellent example of its power can be discerned in no less a central human phenomenon than religion. From the primitive importance of...
the sacred fire to the frequency of sun-worship in more developed religions—such as the Chaldean and Egyptian—and the sophisticated metaphysics of light in the most advanced theologies, the ocular presence in a wide variety of religious practices has been striking. Some faiths, like Manichean Gnosticism, have fashioned themselves “religions of light”; others, like the often polytheistic Greek religion, assigned a special role to sun gods like Apollo. Unearthly, astral light surrounding the godhead, the divine illumination sought by the mystic, the omniscience of a god always watching his flock, the symbolic primacy of the candle’s flame—all of these have found their way into countless religious systems. So too has the remarkable power attributed to mirrors, which so-called scryers or speculatores have claimed a special gift to read for signs of the divine. At times the insubstantiality of the mirror’s image has been taken as a token of the purity of the dematerialized soul. At others, the “spotted mirror” has been analogized to the immaculate nature of the Virgin Mary.

No less symptomatic of the power of the optical in religion is the tendency of the visionary tradition to posit a higher sight of the seer, who is able to discern a truth denied to normal vision. Here the so-called third eye of the soul is invoked to compensate for the imperfections of the two physical eyes. Often physical blindness is given sacred significance, even if at times as a punishment for transgressions against the gods.

where visual imagery abounds. There is an inexhaustible commentary on “the eye in the text.”


34. For a survey of religions of light, see Gustav Menzhe, “Die Lichtsymbolik in der Religionsgeschichte,” Studium Generale, 10 (1957), pp. 422-432.

35. For accounts of the religious importance of mirrors, see Benjamin Goldberg, The Mirror and Man (Charlottesville, Va., 1985); and Herbert Grabs, The Musteal Glass: Mirror-Imagery in Tiales and Texts of the Middle Ages and the English Renaissance, trans. Gordon Collier (Cambridge, 1982).


Thomas Carlyle once called “spiritual optics” has, of course, continued to have a powerful secular effect well after its original religious sources lost much of their legitimacy.

But as might be expected of so deeply affecting a phenomenon, the ocular presence in religion has also aroused a hostile reaction. Its privileged role has been challenged, especially when the gap between spiritual and mundane optics has been perceived as unbridgeable. In fact, suspicion of the illusory potential of images has often led to full-fledged iconophobia. Monotheistic religions, beginning with Judaism, have been deeply wary of the threat of pagan idolatry. The fictional character of artificial images, which can only be false simulators of the “truth,” has occasioned distrust among more puritanical critics of representation. St. Paul’s celebrated warning against the speculum obscurum, the glass (or mirror) through which we see only darkly, vividly expressed this caution about terrestrial sight. Religious distrust was also aroused by the capacity of vision to inspire what Augustine condemned as concepscripta ocularum, ocular desire, which diverts our minds from more spiritual concerns. These and like suspicions have at times come to dominate religious movements and dictate long-standing religious taboos. Moses’s struggle with Aaron over the Golden Calf, the Islamic rejection of figurative representation, the iconoclastic controversy of the eighth-century Byzantine church, the Cistercian monasticism of St. Bernard, the English Lollards, and finally the Protestant Reformation all express the antiocular subcurrent of religious thought. In fact, this hostility remains alive today in the work of such theologians as Jacques Ellul, whose Humiliation of the Word, written in 1981, reads like a summation of every imaginable religious complaint against the domination of sight.


39. Saint Augustine, Confessions, chap. 35.

Ellul’s animus against vision cannot, however, be understood solely in the context of the time-honored tradition of religious iconophobia, for it draws as well on a much wider antivisual discourse that extends beyond the boundaries of religious thought. That discourse, I hope to demonstrate, is a pervasive but generally ignored phenomenon of twentieth-century Western thought. Although by no means confined to one locale, it is most prevalent and multifarious in a country where it may seem, for reasons we will examine shortly, highly improbable. That country is France. It will be the main purpose of this study to demonstrate and explore what at first glance may seem a surprising proposition: a great deal of recent French thought in a wide variety of fields is in one way or another imbued with a profound suspicion of vision and its hegemonic role in the modern era.²⁴¹

To establish this argument, I will begin with a general consideration of the history of Western attitudes toward sight in its various guises. After focusing more precisely on the honored place of the visual in French culture since the time of Louis XIV and Descartes, I will turn to the indications of its crisis in the late nineteenth century by examining changes in the visual arts, literature, and philosophy, most notably the work of Henri Bergson. I will then explore more explicit manifestations of hostility to visual primacy in the work of artists and critics like Georges Bataille and André Breton, philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Emmanuel Levinas, social theorists like Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, and Guy Debord, psychoanalysts like Jacques Lacan and Luce Irigaray, cultural critics like Roland Barthes and Christian Metz, and poststructuralist theorists like Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard. In so doing, I hope to clarify the implications of the denigration of vision for the current debate over modernity and postmodernity.

Before beginning so ambitious an undertaking, a few words of methodological explanation are in order. The focus of this study is on a discourse rather than on a visual culture in its entirety. It would, in fact, be very hazardous to characterize French culture as a whole as hostile to the visual. Paris, “the City of Lights,” remains for many the most dazzling and brilliant urban setting ever devised by our species. The fascination of the French with such visually dominated phenomena as fashion, cinema, or public ceremonial remains unabated. And as anyone who has spent the month of August on the Côte d’Azur can easily testify, they are scarcely less fascinated than ancient solar cultists in “worshiping the sun.”²⁴² Indeed, even their intellectuals tend to be obsessed with visual phenomena, as the remarkable preoccupation of so many of them with painting, photography, film, and architecture demonstrates.

And yet, for many that obsession has turned in a negative direction, as an essentially ocularphobic discourse has seeped into the pores of French intellectual life. By choosing to call the complex of antivisual attitudes a discourse, I am fully aware that I am invoking one of the most loosely used terms of our time. It has been employed in a host of different contexts, from the communicative rationalism of a Jürgen Habermas to the archaeology of knowledge of a Foucault; from the computerized Althusserianism of a Michel Pêcheux to the sociolinguistics of a Malcolm Coulthard; from the textual analysis of a Zelig Harris to the ethnomethodology of a Harvey Sacks.²⁴³

²⁴¹ Other examples of a similar attitude will no doubt occur to readers familiar with different national traditions: for example, American pragmatism with its distrust of spectatorial epistemology or German hermeneutics with its general privileging of the ear over the eye. It would also be possible to pursue the theme in the work of individual thinkers outside of the orbit of French thought, such as Wittgenstein with his subtle ruminations on the distinction between “seeing” and “seeing-as.”


Despite these contrary and shifting usages, discourse remains the best term to denote the level on which the object of this inquiry is located, that being a corpus of more or less loosely interwoven arguments, metaphors, assertions, and prejudices that cohere more associatively than logically in any strict sense of the term. Discourse in this usage is explicitly derived from the Latin discurrere, which means a running around in all directions. The anticolonocentric discourse that I hope to examine is precisely that: an often unsystematic, sometimes internally contradictory texture of statements, associations, and metaphors that never fully cohere in a rigorous way. No single figure expresses all of its dimensions and none would be likely to accept them all, even if they were explicitly posed as positive arguments. Nor has there been anything like a conscious conspiracy determining its dissemination. But as a powerful if at times subliminal context, the discourse we will explore has helped shape the attitudes of a wide variety of French intellectuals who share little else in terms of their disciplines, politics, or theoretical self-consciousness. At times, it provides them with a vocabulary to discuss other issues, such as subjectivity, the Enlightenment, and humanism. At others, it seems to determine the way they approach those same issues, as a powerful metaphor often does, lending arguments an emotional tone and critical energy that would otherwise be inexplicable.

"Discourse analysis," as James Clifford has noted, "is always in a sense, unfair to authors. It is interested not in what they have to say or feel as subjects, but is concerned merely with statements as related to other statements in a field." Discourse as I am using it is thus cut across the bound-

aries of what Freud would have called the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious. It includes Pécheux’s "forgetting no. 1," which the subject cannot fully remember, and his "forgetting no. 2," which a certain amount of effort can restore to consciousness. That only perhaps an outsider can bring it more fully to the surface is the justificatory assumption of this study, which aims not only to reveal the extent of this hidden discursive continent, but also to probe its implications in a critical way.

In holding on to such a hope, it will be quickly realized that the author is betraying his sympathy for one of the targets of the discourse in certain of its bleaker moods. That is, I remain unrepentantly beholden to the ideal of illumination that suggests an Enlightenment faith in clarifying indistinct ideas. To make matters worse, I will employ a method that unapologetically embraces one of the anticolonocentric discourse’s other major targets, a synoptic survey of an intellectual field at some remove from it. Here I invite the same reproach made in some of the responses to an earlier work that dealt with the Western Marxist concept of totality: that I am tacitly arrogating to myself the very totalizing vantage point called into serious question by the crisis of holistic thinking my narrative has reconstructed.

A fateful, if unanticipated, continuity between the two books is in fact demonstrated by the opening metaphor of the first, which called for "mapping the uncertain terrain" of Western Marxism, a figure of speech that immediately evokes the visual distance of a stranger not at home in the landscape he or she must survey from afar. But as any honest geographer will readily admit, mapmaking cannot escape the bias—both in the literal sense of a slanted perspective and in the metaphorical one of a

44. This disclaimer is necessary to set straight the confusion concerning my intentions evident in John Rajchman’s otherwise very interesting essay, "Foucault’s Art of Seeing," October, 44 (Spring, 1988), p. 90.


47. Martin Jay, Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas (Berkeley, 1984); the reproach was made in a thoughtful review essay by Ferenc Fehér in Theory and Society, 14, 6 (November, 1985), p. 873.

cultural prejudice—of the mapmaker. There is no "view from nowhere" for even the most scrupulously "detached" observer.

To these charges let me plead guilty, but with extenuating circumstances. First, as I've tried to argue elsewhere, the traditional intellectual historian's tool of synoptic content analysis, when complicated by a healthy distrust of reductive paraphrase, is indispensable in making sense of the past. For it expresses a certain cautious optimism about the potential for a communicative interaction between the historian and his subject matter—the fusion, as Hans-Georg Gadamer would optimistically put it, of their horizons. Horizon is of course itself a visual metaphor, if a less totalizing one than synopsis. It suggests that finite vantage point from which the historian "sees" the past, an insight hermeneutically minded historians since the days of J. C. Chladnius in the early eighteenth century have known well. Even when partial horizons are fused, no absolute God's-eye view above the fray is possible. But perhaps some advantage is nonetheless gained from the attempt to "achieve a perspective," as we say, on the material, and then to compare it with those of the participants involved, as the materials they have left behind allow us to reconstruct them.

In this particular case, I have been fortunate to be able to discuss this argument with several of the figures it purports to explain, thus experiencing more active fusion—or at least interaction—of horizons than is given to most historians. In a striking number of cases, they were fully conversant with the implications of their own work on visual themes, but were unaware of the larger dimensions of the discourse in which it was embedded. Although my attempts to convince them of its extent did not always fully succeed, a kind of fusion seems to have begun. For my own part, I can verify that my horizon has been transformed by this opportunity in ways that I hope have increased the subtlety and plausibility of the book's argument.

Another warrant for the retention of a synoptic approach comes from the methodological reflections of the French intellectual who has himself written among the most trenchant studies of visual themes, Jean Starobinski. In the preface to his collection of essays, L'oeil vivant, he comments on the value and the dangers of what he calls "le regard surplombant" (the look from above):

Despite our desire to lose ourselves in the living depths of a work, we are constrained to distance ourselves from it in order to speak of it. Why then not deliberately establish a distance that will reveal to us, in a panoramic perspective, the surroundings with which the work is organically linked? We would try to discern certain significant correspondences that haven't been perceived by the writer, to interpret his mental unconscious, to read the complex relations that unite a destiny and a work to their historical and social milieu.

After then acknowledging the threats inherent in a one-sided regard surplombant, most notably the disappearance of the work itself into its context, Starobinski concludes with a call for a judicious balance, which this study also hopes to maintain:

The complete critique is perhaps not one that aims at totality (as does le regard surplombant) nor that which aims at intimacy (as does identifying intuition); it is the look that knows how to demand, in its turn, distance and intimacy, knowing in advance...


that the truth lies not in one or the other attempt, but in the movement that passes indeliberately from one to the other. One must refuse neither the vertigo of distance nor that of proximity; one must desire that double excess where the look is always near to losing all its powers.\footnote{52}

It is, let me end these introductory remarks by emphasizing, such a willingness to risk this loss that ultimately empowers the intellectual historian to enter the discursive field itself in a critical way. How successful the present effort will be in this regard remains, of course, very much to be seen.

\footnote{52. Ibid.}