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## ***The Commerce of Vision: Optical Culture and Perception in Antebellum America***

**Peter John Brownlee**

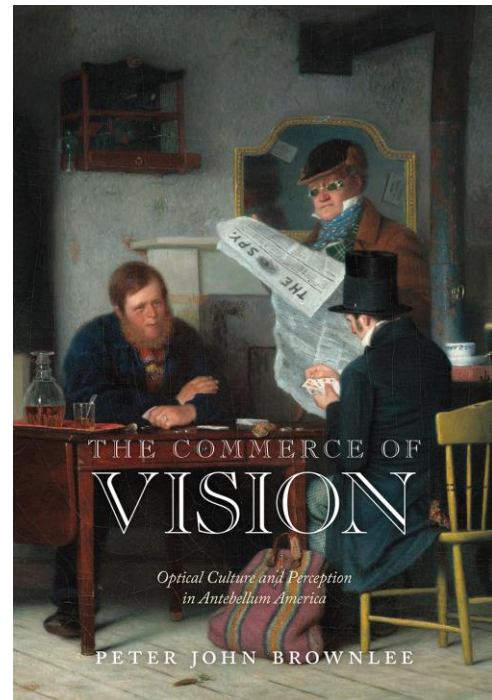
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Since Plato's allegory of the cave, if not before, it has been a given that vision plays a fundamental role in structuring knowledge. What is less certain is how to monitor or evaluate the process by which this knowledge is obtained, how to make vision visible. Early work in this direction was performed in the 1920s by sociologist Karl Mannheim, who proposed that "every point of view is particular to a certain definite [sociological] situation," an idea that influenced Erwin Panofsky's later notion of iconology as method.<sup>1</sup> These rather grand formulations of vision as a mechanism of culture seemed to owe more to earlier, ineffable concepts such as *Kunstwollen* or *Weltanschauung*, rendered in English as the will to art and a "collective mental structure," respectively.<sup>2</sup>

Vision might have been rendered visible by these largely Germanic scholars, but it was plagued by a lack of precision: what did a worldview really mean, anyway, and what did it matter? By the early 1970s, however, social art historians Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall attempted to remedy this vagueness by applying the intellection of Mannheim, Panofsky, and other members of the Hamburg school into the examination of a much richer yet more concrete range of physical objects and visual skills.<sup>3</sup> We could appreciate a fifteenth-century Italian merchant's capaciousness of vision from the way he appraised the volume of a barrel, or a sixteenth-century Dutch painter's taste for comprehensiveness in a map. Vision's visibility, once moored in abstractions, became newly prominent in the flood of visual culture studies that flourished in Alpers's and Baxandall's wake, and, by the mid-1990s, the so-called visual turn was well underway.

Peter John Brownlee's new book, *The Commerce of Vision: Optical Culture and Perception in Antebellum America*, falls into this scholarly lineage. His ostensible quarry is an



antebellum visual culture that developed around the intersecting concerns of ophthalmology and optometry, reform physiology, and a rapidly expanding market economy, but, in the tradition of Mannheim, Alpers, and Baxandall, he sees vision as more than the mere sum of its parts. Brownlee's analysis reaches beyond the usual metaphors of nineteenth-century vision as possessing, knowing, or controlling, analyzing the "economy of the eyes" as a shifting field that is at once physiological, commercial, political, and cultural, and almost always attended by doubt and ambiguity. Trained as an art historian, he deploys close looking with gimlet-eyed sharpness to paintings and a wide range of print culture, from signboards to medical treatises, as well as to literature by such writers as Edgar Allan Poe and others. Defying the antagonism occasionally found between visual culture studies and art history, Brownlee roots his readings of these materials in social and political events such as the Panic of 1837 or the market revolution, which is to say, in the kind of sociohistorical context that has defined much of the scholarship on American art.

Such a union has, however, not always been an easy one. William Innes Homer, scholar of late nineteenth-century American painting, commented in 1998 that "[v]isual culture may only be a passing fad," and portrayed it as a natural enemy of "socially based approaches."<sup>4</sup> The potential for enmity between these two methods stems from social art history's rigorous historicism, on the one hand, and the omnivorous, and sometimes ahistorical, interdisciplinarity of visual culture studies that takes its cues from fields such as film studies and anthropology. These tensions between an orderly history of art and nonhierarchical visual culture are not entirely absent from Brownlee's volume. In his introduction, the author announces his intention to attend to "the cloudy, the unclear, the ambiguous" (11). And, although these excursions do not surface in the main text itself, the footnotes reveal a theoretical armature adapted from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of assemblage, a model of interconnected, rhizomatic multiples. This is congruent with an account that easily shifts from commercial print culture to the developing science of diagnosing ophthalmic disorders, or from close analyses of genre paintings to broad considerations of epistemology and subjectivity.

At times, one does wish that this argument were a little less rhizomatic and a bit more compact. Brownlee's quick shifts from visual culture to ophthalmic science to economic and philosophical discourses can be hard to keep up with, especially since his explanation of his Deleuzian approach is kept at bay in the footnotes. Thankfully, these concerns are outweighed by Brownlee's decision to ground his analysis in careful attention to the materiality of the objects he investigates, a perspective that provides a salutary counterweight to the subtler strands of thought that he weaves together elsewhere. As he writes in his introductory chapter about his quicksilver subject, "Conceptions of vision and formulations of observing subjects do, in fact, cohere and reside in the line of an engraving, in the shaded areas of bold new letterforms, or in the meticulous rendering of transparent glass in prints and paintings" (10). Perhaps not surprisingly, the passages where the author lingers on these material and visual immediacies are often the strongest, giving the reader reliable touchstones amid a whirl of scientific, philosophical, economic, and cultural discourses.

The book is composed of six chapters subdivided into three parts. Part one, "The Problem of Vision," addresses just that, problems that, moreover, a bevy of newly emerging medical practices, ophthalmic specialists, surgical procedures, and eye infirmaries aimed to solve. These efforts resulted in a preoccupation that filtered down to common folk, who traded recipes for eyewashes containing laudanum and tisanes of sassafras "like cooking recipes

and sewing tips” (27). No matter their status, all agreed that modern conditions had heightened the risks to one’s eyesight. White-collar workers, newly concerned about their ability to read fine print and numbers in close, often poorly lit urban settings, sought out tracts dispensing advice on how to improve one’s visual acuity. Spectacles, which “emblemized productivity, efficiency, mobility, and economy” were becoming increasingly affordable to middle-class buyers, another commodity that could be bought and sold (72). Universal standards around optometric rehabilitation did not exist, and lenses ground to minute and exacting standards were hard for American firms to produce. To complicate matters further, a large quantity of cheap, usually ineffective spectacles flooded the market at the same time as their technically improved brethren, potentially hoodwinking consumers and casting doubt on the rationality of the economic machinery into which they were all incorporated. In an enlightening reading of Rembrandt Peale’s portrait [Rubens Peale with a Geranium](#) (1801; National Gallery of Art), Brownlee demonstrates how these tensions manifest in what he calls an “optically enabled self” split between the intimate confines of empirical, scientific knowledge, symbolized by Rubens’s snug “botanical laboratory,” and the looser world of commerce, denoted by a virtual image of reflected window panes that “hints at an outer world of commerce and exchange” that lies beyond (53).

Part two, “The Chaos of Print,” brilliantly situates these problems in a “congested visual field” of broadsides layered and pasted one over another, filled with “fattened” and “gargantuan” letterforms that lent grandiosity to their emphatic, commercial claims. Brownlee’s discussion of how ink, wood, cast metal, and lateral routers were used to make these complex and often illusionistic forms makes for fascinating reading, and he points out that their presence in American urban settings helped to condition an embodied motility that echoes that of the modern, urban observer later made familiar by the figure of the flaneur. Inserting the stereotypical typography of antebellum visual culture into a wider, transatlantic conversation also establishes fascinating parallels with other new media of the era, such as the penny press. Drawing on theorists ranging from Rudolf Arnheim to Roland Barthes, Brownlee argues that these bloated typefaces saturated urban life, forming new observers who were predisposed to a dangerously myopic focus on consumption and spectacle.

The following chapter, “Signboards, Vision, and Commerce in the Antebellum City,” extends this argument to signboards, which multiplied dramatically in number and complexity in the mid-nineteenth century, contributing a kaleidoscopic, dizzying intensity that mirrored the social dislocation of antebellum commodity culture. Brownlee recovers the print-saturated nature of the urban sphere through advertisements, daguerreotypes, prints of street scenes, and manuals on sign painting itself, arguing that these spectacles of commodification concealed the labor and the social relations that helped to produce them. He argues that this was a wrenching shift. In place of the clear and relatively staid urban spaces of the federal era, antebellum signage worked to produce confusion, avidity, alienation, and, of course, vastly increased profits.

Part three, “Painting, Print, and Perception,” moves from urban visual culture to antebellum painting and literature that sought to recreate its effects. Brownlee’s final two chapters examine how newspapers and paper money, respectively, shaped the kinds of perception reflected in paintings by Richard Caton Woodville, William Sidney Mount, and Francis W. Edmonds, as well as works of fiction including Herman Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener*. In the penultimate chapter, Brownlee argues for a kind of telescopic “newspaper vision,” a

cultural mania for extending one's sight near and far, with "eyewitness news" published in the papers of the penny press that bore names such as "observer," "telescope," and "spy." These cultural conditions informed paintings like Woodville's *War News from Mexico* (1848; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art) and others by casting the viewer's eye from the relatively shallow, theatrical settings of which Woodville was fond across a Brobdingnagian continent. That this gaze was already weakened by ocular strain and other demands of the market economy only served to highlight antebellum America's obsession with corporeal fitness and debility. In the final chapter, "Paper Money, Spectral Illusions, and the Limits of Vision," this economic, bodily, and political dissolution is made complete in spectral thematics that Brownlee traces across a print culture of banknotes, political cartoons, and scientific treatises, as well as through genre paintings by Edmonds and George Caleb Bingham. This analysis is most acute when it comes to Edmonds, whose career as a banker and a painter helps guide the reader through a chapter that touches on finance, optics, spiritualism, and, of course, painting.

Throughout his volume, Brownlee pursues a Whitman-esque bounty of broadsides, typographical specimen sheets, physiological treatises, and other printed materials. Mirroring its subject, the book pages shelter and disclose new truths and contradictions, abstractions and embodiments, revealing neither certainty nor control but a topography of ambiguity. Such terrain might remind the reader of Deleuzian plateaus, but perhaps the last word should go to Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose gnomic phrase about the mid-nineteenth century as an "ocular age" begins Brownlee's book, and who also famously cautioned that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."<sup>5</sup> *The Commerce of Vision* matches the undeniable richness and complexity of antebellum America's ocularity with deft, close readings that will bear repeated examination.

*June 22, 2020: An earlier version of this article identified the wrong collection for Woodville's War News from Mexico. It is in the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas.*

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, Routledge Classics in Sociology (1960; reprint, London: Routledge, 2013), 80.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, trans. Catherine Porter (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 14.

<sup>3</sup> For Alpers as the first to use the term, see Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, "What is Visual Culture?," ed. Joanne Morra and Marquard Smith, *Visual Culture: What Is Visual Culture Studies?* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2006), 47. Alpers herself has credited Baxandall with the term, however, as noted by Morra and Smith, "Introduction," in *Visual Culture: What Is Visual Culture Studies?*, 17n10.

<sup>4</sup> William Innes Homer, "Visual Culture: A New Paradigm," *American Art* 12, no. 1 (1998): 9.

<sup>5</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Essays* (London: James Fraser, 1841), 58.