

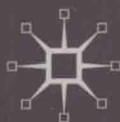
# Illustrations, Optics and Objects in Nineteenth-Century Literary and Visual Cultures

Edited by Luisa Calè and Patrizia Di Bello



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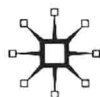
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Foreword by

Hilary Fraser



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# Foreword

Hilary Fraser

This collection of essays, which is concerned with objects and practices of reading, viewing and collecting in the nineteenth century, focuses on material visibility and the formulation of a material aesthetic. It represents an exciting intervention into current debates about visuality inaugurated by Jonathan Crary's influential book *Techniques of the Observer* (1990). Crary's project, in writing what he proposes as the pre-history of Guy Debord's 'spectacle', is to delineate the emergence of a new corporealised observer in the nineteenth century. His account of the modernisation of vision and the new validation of the visible in that period begins by explaining how the sense of touch, which had been a crucial component of classical seventeenth and eighteenth-century theories of vision (according to the Cartesian model, the blind 'see with their hands'),<sup>1</sup> became dissociated from sight in the nineteenth century; and how this 'unloosening of the eye from the network of referentiality incarnated in tactility', this 'autonomisation of sight', was 'a historical condition for the rebuilding of an observer fitted for the tasks of "spectacular" consumption'.<sup>2</sup>

Crary's focus is, like Debord's, on visuality, and his thesis requires him to himself slough off the tactile. But what of the equivalently novel conceptualisation of touch in the visual field that might also be said to have begun to emerge in the nineteenth century? What was the pre-history of, say, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's multi-sensorial phenomenology, according to which 'Everything I see is on principle within my reach [...] The visible world and the world of my motor projects are both total parts of the same Being', and whereby the body is 'a self by confusion, narcissism, inherence of the see-er in the seen, the toucher in the touched, the feeler in the felt – a self, then, that is caught up in things, having a front and a back, a past and a future'? Where might we look for the cultural lineage of his celebrated account of the materiality and embodiment of perception: 'Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is one of them. It is caught in the fabric of the world ...'?<sup>3</sup> This is the intriguing territory that the essays in this volume begin to map.

Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic theories were developed in three essays on painting written between 1945 ('Cézanne's Doubt') and 1960 ('Eye and

Mind'). Therefore, one area in which we might seek this pre-history is in late nineteenth-century writing on art. During the same period that Merleau-Ponty was formulating his ideas for the posthumously published 'Eye and Mind', on modern painting and philosophy, the art critic and connoisseur Bernard Berenson was producing his own last book, *Seeing and Knowing*, which was written in 1948 and published in 1953. Berenson had written his first ground-breaking studies of Renaissance art when he was in his thirties, in the 1890s, at which time he was closely identified, by contemporaries such as Roger Fry, with a fin-de-siècle school of art criticism founded on physiological aesthetics. In the mid-twentieth century, and in the teeth of modern developments in art which he deplored, Berenson was still insisting upon the artist's power to make objects 'as tangibly visible as if you could touch them' and asserting 'the psycho-physiological urge to create'.<sup>4</sup> Berenson's aesthetics and art criticism, developed in the context of late Victorian visual philosophy and practice, provides a way of situating the material on optics and objects in the essays here collected within an emergent theorisation of the tangibility of the visual in the nineteenth century.

'Look into your sensorium, and write. All will then go well.'<sup>5</sup> This was Berenson's advice in 1893 to his friend Edith Cooper, soon after she and Katharine Bradley had published, as Michael Field, a volume of exphrasic poems entitled *Sight and Song* (1892). His own way of approaching art was multi-sensorial. Kenneth Clark described his method of authenticating paintings thus: 'He would come very close to [a painting] and tap its surface and then listen attentively, as if expecting some almost inaudible voice to reply. Then, after a long pause, he would murmur a name.'<sup>6</sup> Berenson's most important contribution to late nineteenth-century aesthetics and art criticism, though, was his signature theory of the tactile imagination. It was first articulated in *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* (1896), in which he defines 'the essential in the art of painting' as being 'somehow to stimulate our consciousness of tactile values, so that the picture shall have at least as much power as the object represented, to appeal to our tactile imagination'.<sup>7</sup>

Berenson drew on his reading in the current psychological literature, especially the work of William James, in the development of his thesis. He wrote to Katharine Bradley ('Michael') in 1895: 'Psychology is more & more absorbing me. Tell Field [Edith Cooper] that as she loves me & herself I urge her to get the large edition of James' Psychology & to read it diligently'.<sup>8</sup> In *The Florentine Painters* he notes that 'Psychology has ascertained that sight alone gives us no accurate sense of the third dimension', rather 'In our infancy long before we are conscious

of the process, the sense of touch, helped on by muscular sensations of movement, teaches us to appreciate depth, the third dimension, both in objects and in space':

In the same unconscious years we learn to make of touch, of the third dimension, the test of reality. The child is still dimly aware of the intimate connexion between touch and the third dimension. He cannot persuade himself of the unreality of Looking-Glass Land until he has touched the back of the mirror. Later, we entirely forget the connexion, although it remains true that every time our eyes recognize reality, we are, as a matter of fact, giving tactile values to retinal impressions.<sup>9</sup>

In the two-dimensional form of painting, the artist, in order to achieve a realistic effect, must then construct a third dimension, arousing 'the tactile sense' by means of the surface texture of the paint on the canvas, for, he writes, 'I must have the illusion of being able to touch a figure, I must have the illusion of varying muscular sensations inside my palm and fingers corresponding to the various projections of this figure, before I shall take it for granted as real, and let it affect me lastingly' (p. 63).

It was his insistence on the physical apprehension of the plastic qualities of an object represented imaginatively on a canvas, those qualities in a painting that he regarded as creating the illusion of tangibility and stimulating the sense of touch, that led to Berenson's writing about art and aesthetics being associated with physiological rather than psychological aesthetics, though the two were closely connected in their origins. His emphasis was on what he called the 'ideated sensations' of movement, energy, space, and above all touch in art, which in his view heighten our sense of reality in ways that merely visual sensations do not. He celebrates the capacity of great figurative art to stimulate, for example, 'muscular feelings of varying pressure and strain' (p. 95). Thus, of Pollaiuolo's *Battle of the Nudes* he writes:

Look at the combatant prostrate on the ground and his assailant bending over, each intent on stabbing the other. See how the prostrate man plants his foot on the thigh of his enemy, and note the tremendous energy he exerts to keep off the foe, who, turning as upon a pivot, with his grip on the other's head, exerts no less force to keep the advantage gained. The significance of all these muscular strains and pressures is so rendered that we cannot help realizing them; we imagine ourselves imitating all the movements,

and exerting the force required for them [...] while under the spell of this illusion [...] we feel as if the elixir of life, not our own sluggish blood, were coursing through our veins.

(pp. 98–9)

Similarly, of the same painter's *Hercules Strangling Antaeus* he avers:

As you realize the suction of Hercules' grip on the earth, the swelling of his calves with the pressure that falls on them, the violent throwing back of his chest, the stifling force of his embrace; as you realize the supreme effort of Antaeus, with one hand crushing down upon the head and the other tearing at the arm of Hercules, you feel as if a fountain of energy had sprung up under your feet and were playing through your veins.

(p. 99)

Michael Field was especially appreciative of the tactile dimension of both Berenson's and his collaborator (eventually his wife) Mary Costelloe's writing about art. Katharine Bradley writes to the latter of a passage from her forthcoming *Guide to the Italian Pictures at Hampton Court* (1894): "With stuffs that tickle the eye & yet rest it" is a phrase in the Bonifazio paper – that gives one the very artist. You can give the artists [...] by their way of taking pleasure, whether they liked the feel of a stuff, as well as its hue, & how it seemed to them nicest the folds shd. fall'.<sup>10</sup> The Hampton Court *Guide* everywhere demonstrates and elucidates this tactile imagination at work. Of Giorgione's *The Sleeping Venus*, for example, subject of one of the lush lyrics in Michael Field's *Sight and Song*, Costelloe writes that this artist's works 'never fail' in their 'power to call up the actual physical sensations of the scenes themselves [...] they speak directly to the sensations, making the beholder feel refreshed and soothed, as if actually reclining on the grass in the shade of trees, with his mind free to muse on what delights it most' (p. 13).

Other friends and associates of the Berensons, such as their neighbour in Florence, the art historian, aesthete and fiction-writer Vernon Lee, and her companion Kit Anstruther-Thomson, pursued their own empirical experimentation to demonstrate the physiological basis of aesthetic responses, which eventuated in a series of intriguing joint publications in physiological aesthetics, beginning with the essay 'Beauty and Ugliness', which appeared in 1897. In their interestingly eccentric intervention into late nineteenth-century psychology, they elaborate an aesthetic of empathy based on Kit's recorded physiological responses to art works, arguing that the contemplation of a beautiful thing – a

painting, a building or sculptural form – elicits a motor response in the viewer, who unconsciously imitates the formal properties of the object of vision and, as it were, projects their own bodily movements back onto it: ‘the aesthetic seeing, the “realisation” of form, was connected’ as Lee later wrote, ‘with bodily conditions and motor phenomena’ that included ‘muscular strains’, ‘“sensations of direction” [...] and sensations of modification in the highly subtle apparatus for equilibrium’, as well as ‘sensations of altered respiration and circulation sufficient to account for massive conditions of organic well-being and the reverse’.<sup>11</sup> The ‘Anthropomorphic Aesthetics’ developed by Lee and Anstruther-Thomson depends upon a ‘projection of our inner experience into the forms which we see and realise’ (p. 17). Their insistence that aesthetic experience ‘consists in the attribution of an individual and varying complexus of dynamic (and perhaps organic) conditions’, and therefore that ‘it must always, in real experience, bear the character of the individual form by which it is elicited’ (p. 31), is close to Berenson’s theory of the importance of the tactile imagination, and indeed he was to accuse them (unjustly) of plagiarising his ideas.<sup>12</sup>

Stung by these accusations, Lee’s response was that they were ideas that were in the air: ‘We were part of a mutually, perhaps unconsciously, collaborating band of enquirers’.<sup>13</sup> She, the more established cultural critic, and more-widely read in continental psychology and aesthetics, had also been more generous in her affirmation of Berenson’s originality. In an interesting exchange of 1894 with Katharine Bradley, Berenson bemusedly recounts how Lee’s attribution of great originality to him is a complete mystery to him:

She has discovered that I have discovered the greatest discovery that has ever been made in aesthetics. She has told me in words what my discovery is; it seems to me like no discovery at all. She threatens therefore to take all the credit of it, unless I hasten & write a book ‘on the genesis of the work of art’ embodying therein these my by-myself-unrecognised discoveries. Is not this a misfortune to befall a creature so conceited as I am supposed to be – to be unconscious of his real greatness? It is like Columbus not knowing that he had discovered America.

According to Lee, he sighs, ‘the only way I have of finding out what I am & what I ought to do is to read those gentlemen whom my discovery, when I become conscious of it, will cast into oblivion, or at least render archaic’.<sup>14</sup> He proposes to start by reading Hegel’s *Aesthetics* and asks Katharine to lend him their copy.



My point is that, for all that Berenson may have, in ways seemingly unbeknown to himself, discovered and articulated new visual methods and new ideas about perception in a particular form and in relation to particular objects – in the form of art criticism, as applied to Renaissance painting, drawing and sculpture – they were methods and ideas that were recognisably, to Lee at least, located in a contemporary intellectual and cultural field that included aestheticians, psychologists and philosophers and was more broadly characteristic of nineteenth-century aesthetic theory and practice. They were, in short, part of a more general exploration of the embodied nature of vision in the nineteenth century that the essays in this volume explore.

*Illustrations, Optics and Objects in Nineteenth-Century Literary and Visual Cultures* finds suggestive connections between early and late nineteenth-century visual-tactile encounters in various forms of multi-sensorial aesthetic engagement that took place from Romanticism to the Victorian fin de siècle. It proposes new perspectives on nineteenth-century visuality that are driven by and speak to the 'material turn' in modern cultural studies that is itself indebted to the material aesthetics of twentieth-century philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty and Walter Benjamin. The collapse of distinctions between internal impressions and external signs of which Crary writes are evident in the physiological aesthetics of Lee and the Berenson circle. We have, to be sure, moved from the high cultural arena favoured by Berenson to the realms of photography and print culture, from the museum to the private collection. The material objects under scrutiny include green glasses and blue stones, and the pleasures and desires of looking and handling are explicitly gendered and sexualised; but a shared understanding of the materiality of visual experience enables this volume to offer a new articulation of 'corporealised vision' in the nineteenth century that pays proper attention to the neglected matter of touch.

## Notes

1. René Descartes, *La Dioptrique*, Discours 1, quoted in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. by Galen A. Johnson, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), pp. 121–61: 131.
2. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1990), p. 19.
3. Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', pp. 124–5.

4. Bernard Berenson, *Seeing and Knowing* (London: Evelyn, Adams & Mackay, 1968), pp. 23, 92.
5. Biblioteca Berenson, Villa I Tatti, Florence, B.B. to Field, 16 June 1893.
6. Kenneth Clark, *Another Part of the Wood: A Self-Portrait* (London: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 138.
7. Bernhard Berenson, *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), pp. 63–4.
8. Biblioteca Berenson, B.B. to Michael, 24 October 1895.
9. Berenson, *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance*, pp. 62–3, hereafter in text.
10. Biblioteca Berenson, K.H. Bradley to Mrs Costelloe, 2 February 1892. The passage on Bonifazio may be found in Mary Logan, *Guide to the Italian Pictures at Hampton Court, with short studies of the artists*, The Kyrle Pamphlets, II (London: A. D. Innes & Co, 1894), p. 27.
11. Vernon Lee and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1912), pp. 25–6, hereafter in text.
12. Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2003), pp. 158–65; René Wellek, 'Vernon Lee, Bernard Berenson and Aesthetics', in *Friendship's Garland: Essays Presented to Mario Praz*, ed. by Vittorio Gabrieli, 2 vols (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1966), II, 233–51.
13. Quoted in Colby, p. 167.
14. Biblioteca Berenson, B.B. to Michael, 22 February 1894.

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An earlier version of Sophie Thomas's chapter appeared in her monograph *Romanticism and Visuality: Fragments, History, Spectacle* (Routledge, 2007). We are grateful to Routledge for permission to revise and reprint it.

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- 2 Medusa Head, hand painted animated lantern slide, France, c.1800; courtesy of the collection of Laurent Mannoni
- 3 Flemish School, *Head of Medusa* (oil on wood) 16th century © Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy / The Bridgeman Art Library
- 4 Alinari Archives – Florence: Gaspare Maria Paoletti, ‘Sala della Niobe nella Galleria degli Uffizi di Firenze’ (Gallery of Niobe in the Uffizi, Florence) (1856–57), albumen print
- 5 ‘Sicilian Youths: from a Photograph by W. Gloëden’, *The Studio* (June 1893), p. 103, courtesy of The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Per. 17006 c.29
- 6 Alinari Archives – Florence: Wilhelm Von Gloeden, ‘Giovani nudi su una terrazza panoramica’ (Naked youths on a panoramic terrace (c.1900))
- 7 Adolphe Braun, ‘The Castle of Chillon’, Lake Geneva (c.1867), albumen print, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Lucy Dalbiac Luard Fund, 1982.322, photograph © 2009 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
- 8 Alinari Archives – Florence: Robert Macpherson, ‘Photographic Pictures of Rome: Veduta di Roma dal Monte Pincio’ (View of Rome from the Pincio hill) (c.1860), albumen print
- 9 Alvin Langdon Coburn, *By St Peter’s*, 1906, photogravure used as frontispiece to ‘Daisy Miller’, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, Volume 18 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), private collection
- 10 Front cover of *The Yellow Book* 1 (1894), designed by Aubrey Beardsley, private collection