

ESSAYS AND STUDIES 2005

Literature and the Visual Media

Edited by David Seed
for the English Association

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D.S. BREWER

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Preface

The essays in this collection consider the interaction between literature – primarily the novel – and the visual media. In his discussion of the connections between Dickens's urban sketches and a twentieth-century film maker Grahame Smith uses the term 'interpenetration', which helpfully applies to all these essays in varying degrees. Dialogue, encounter, interrelation; all these terms avoid the suggestion of simple linear influence. It has now become a commonplace of cultural history to argue that the cinema – the main visual medium discussed in these pages – and literary Modernism both emerged out of a common pool of narrative and representational techniques. As John Plunkett demonstrates, optical entertainments in the nineteenth century, and above all the panorama, suggested new ways of seeing that were quickly converted into verbal expression. This process involved, he argues, a two-way 'cross-over' between different media. At the beginning of the twentieth century a number of factors converged to strengthen the dominance of the visual. Literary impressionism as practised by Conrad, Ford and others privileged the individual perspective with its attendant connection between seeing and understanding. The mass production of cameras had made photography so familiar by 1905 that W.D. Howells in his *London Films* could adopt the stance of a recording sensibility working his 'mental kodak'. The study of the workings of the mind led Henri Bergson to claim that consciousness worked on cinematic lines. The emergence of the cinema and Modernism in the same period enabled experimental writers to use film as *the* sign of contemporaneity. Indeed, from the 1920s onwards an increasing number of novelists – figures as diverse as Gertrude Stein, Evelyn Waugh, and John Dos Passos – wove into their works cinematic techniques like montage and there became evident a professional involvement of novelists in screenwriting. The cinematic novel was born. 'Cinematic' here suggests a heightened visual awareness as well as the specific analogy with film techniques. Judie Newman argues that this awareness informs John Updike's novels, but the signs of this change predate the emergence of a cinema-going generation of writers. As early as *The House of Mirth* (1905) Edith Wharton dramatises the production, circulation, and consumption of visual images in New York society.

The trap in early critical discussions of the relation between novel and film was to concentrate on adaptations and to project a crude model of transposition, so-called 'fidelity' to the work. In his examination of *The Killers* here, Oliver Harris shows how Hemingway's style has been taken as a precursor of *film noir* and possibly helped shape the method of the later American movies; this method was then fed back into the Hemingway's story to produce a narrative that differs strikingly from its 'original'. Harris's detailed discussion demonstrates another keynote of this collection. Whether Dickens, Joyce, or Updike is being described, every writer displays a self-consciousness about visual representation. Indeed, this self-consciousness may be one of the defining characteristics of the cinematic novel. Mark Bould directs our attention to an equally famous work: *Fahrenheit 451*. He argues that, although Ray Bradbury's novel is built around visual oppositions that lend themselves easily to movie adaptation, Truffault's film reveals a sharper sense of method in disturbing and thus problematising realist representation. Carol Watts applies the notion of 'habitus' as a shared cultural space to demonstrate ways in which the cinema informs the performatory dimension of contemporary fiction and its disjunction of sound from image. Her account of 'mutual informing' offers another variation on the theme of encounters between media that runs throughout these essays.

David Seed

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Optical Recreations and Victorian Literature

JOHN PLUNKETT

MOVING IMAGES AND PROJECTION DEVICES had a long history well before the advent of cinema. Panoramas, magic lanterns, and peepshows were ubiquitous forms of public and domestic recreation throughout the nineteenth century. This essay argues that there are significant points of convergence and crossover between nineteenth-century print media and the panoply of optical recreations. The growth of optical recreations played a key role in the development of popular entertainment as an industry. This expansion was paralleled by a comparable increase in the production of popular novels and periodicals, which was instrumental in the growth of the publishing industry. Between 1848 and 1870, the British population increased by forty per cent, yet the number of books produced increased by around four hundred per cent (Davis 202). Optical and print media enjoyed mutually beneficial yet competing roles in the growth of nineteenth-century leisure practices. The synergies between literary production and screen practice are an index of the extent to which the latter permeated nineteenth-century culture and promoted new ways of seeing.

There are two principal forms of interaction between print media and optical recreations. The first stems from the way writers employed optical devices as tropes for the working of the mind: they were particularly employed as figures to materialise processes of creativity, imagination, and memory. In a well-known article, Terry Castle (1988) has traced the way that the *Phantasmagoria* stood for an excessive reverie of thought during the Romantic period (26–61).¹ The troping on the *Phantasamgoria*, however, belongs to a larger nineteenth-century fascination with the metaphoric potential of optical devices. The kaleidoscope, diorama, and magic lantern were all deployed to describe the functioning of the imagination. Optical devices were particularly apt for materialising cognitive processes because, as Isobel Armstrong has argued (1996), many optical recreations provided a sensory experience without a sensory, tactile image (126). They had an embodied yet ideal mode of viewing.

¹ For earlier examples, see Crary 40–3.

Writers' intra-textual use of optical tropes constitutes part of the larger structural convergence between nineteenth-century print media, conceived of in the broadest sense, and optical recreations. Thus, in addition to being used to describe the working of perception, several writers equated the experience of reading with that of viewing an optical show. Rousseau, in a discussion of the multiple characters in the novels of Samuel Richardson, asserted that 'It is easy to awaken the attention by incessantly presenting unheard of adventures and new faces, which pass before the imagination as figures in a magic lanthorn do before the eye' (Rousseau 2: 157). Rousseau treats the audience's experience of the moving images of a magic lantern performance as analogous to a reader's imaginative experience of the passing events in a fictional narrative. The convergence between print and optical media in terms of their consumption was also repeated at the level of aesthetic form and content. There was an intermittent production of books, particularly aimed at a juvenile readership, which attempted to exploit the novelty of the latest optical device or show. Insofar as it was possible, they attempted to replicate the viewing experience of peepshows, panoramas, and dioramas. The success of optical recreations exerted a creative pressure upon the conventional material organisation of the book. The nature of this influence can be thought of in relation to Bourdieu's notion (1993) of a cultural field, where the aesthetic rules of the field are determined by the dominant position within it (29–73). In nineteenth-century popular culture, the pervasiveness of optical recreations meant that, at least to some degree, they were able to define the aesthetic mode of the field.

Although magic lanterns and peepshows were regularly exhibited during the eighteenth century, it was not until the latter decades that optical shows began to form part of an emerging industry of popular entertainment. Robert Barker, for example, first took out a patent for a panorama in June 1787; the patent described 'an entire new Contrivance or Apparatus which is called by him *La Nature à Coup d'Oeil*, for the Purpose of displaying Views of Nature at Large' (Mannoni et al. 157). Barker exhibited his first panorama, a view of Edinburgh, at locations in Glasgow and Edinburgh in 1788; he then moved on to display the same picture in London in 1789.² Barker's success led to the opening of a purpose-built rotunda in Leicester Square in 1793, wherein he could exhibit two enormous circular canvases at once, one of 10,000 square feet and one of around 2,700 square feet. Among the subjects in the early years

² On the history of the panorama, see Altick (1978: 120–40) and Hyde (1988).

were panoramas of the Battle of Waterloo and the Siege of Flushing, together with cityscapes of Dublin, Paris, Venice, and Rome.

The success of the panorama exemplifies why nineteenth-century screen practice was such a fertile source of inspiration for writers. The panorama provided a new way of seeing the world, and of representing the self's relationship to that world. Almost immediately after its introduction, Romantic tourists started to see sweeping landscapes or cityscapes already structured as a panorama. Thomas Malton, for example, explicitly turned to the panorama to describe a London cityscape in his *A Picturesque Tour through the Cities of London and Westminster, illustrated with the most interesting views executed in aquatinta* (1792). Malton was the author of an influential treatise on perspective (1776), and his tour was one of many published during the period, following the example set by Uvedale Price, a key proponent of the picturesque. When Malton attempted to describe his view of London from the standpoint of St Paul's, the panorama was the only form capable of encompassing the totality of the cityscape:

but as language is incapable of conveying adequate ideas of a prospect so extensive and various, I shall not attempt to describe it: indeed the pencil cannot do justice to such a scene, except in the manner of the newly invented Panorama; a mode of representation, when the scenery is correctly drawn, and coloured with proper aerial effect, superior to all others for displaying the beauties of a prospect, seen from a commanding situation; where the spectator turns; and views the whole circle of the horizon. (Malton 1792: 59)

Fast-growing London cannot be represented by conventional linguistic or artistic means. Only a panorama is able to do justice to the vastness of the modern city, which always exceeds the spectator's attempt to encompass it from a single standpoint. The panorama's ability to go beyond the existing conventions of pen and pencil helps to explain why many writers followed the example of Malton, to the extent that 'panorama' became a generic term for any type of comprehensive standpoint.

The fascination with the panorama's new way of seeing was certainly not shared by all. In *The Prelude*, William Wordsworth attacked the panorama in terms that stressed its position within a burgeoning industry of popular entertainment. Whereas Rousseau used the magic lantern as a figure for the work of the imagination, this metaphor was taken literally by Wordsworth. Rather than regarding optical devices as figures for

cognition, he criticised panoramas for actually substituting for the work of the imagination. Wordsworth regarded them as simulated versions of reality; they alienated viewers from their deepest source of spiritual nourishment by replacing the natural world with a world of images. Wordsworth's hostility to the panorama forms part of a sustained attack on popular urban entertainments in book seven of *The Prelude*, which recounts the poet's residences in London in the 1790s. The sensory excess of the London shows he finds, particularly at Bartholomew Fair, come to stand for the unreality of the whole of modern urban existence. The 'moving pageant' of London life is itself treated as a giant show.

The principal attraction of Barker's panorama was its ability to imbue a flat painted scene with three-dimensional depth and life. The panorama, which was exhibited in a rotunda carefully lit to enhance its *trompe l'oeil* effect, offered the opportunity for the spectator to become immersed in its virtual world. Numerous reviews stressed the illusory power of the scene. Yet for Wordsworth, the panorama merely aped the 'absolute presence of reality'. Its all-encompassing circularity was an index to its overweening desire to supersede the natural, corporeal world:

And with his greedy pencil taking in
 A whole horizon with power on all sides,
 Like that of Angels or commission'd Spirits,
 Plant us upon some lofty Pinnacle,
 Or in a Ship on Waters, with a world
 Of life, and life-like mockery, to East,
 To West, beneath, behind us, and before;
 Or more mechanic Artist represent
 By scale exact, in Model, wood or clay,
 From shading colours also borrowing help,
 Some miniature of famous spots and things
 Domestic, or the boast of foreign Realms;
 The Firth of Forth, and Edinburgh throned
 On crags, fit empress of that mountain Land;
 St. Peter's Church; or, more aspiring aim,
 In microscopic vision, Rome itself;
 Or, else perhaps, some rural haunt, the Falls
 Of Tivoli, and high upon that steep
 The Temple of the Sibyl, every tree
 Through all the landscape, tuft, stone, scratch minute,
 And every Cottage, lurking in the rocks,
 All that the Traveller sees when he is there.

(Wordsworth 1979: 238–40)

The elevated perspective of the panorama holds out the possibility of an all-seeing viewpoint that, according to Wordsworth, belongs only to angels and the divine. The appeal of the panorama is like that of numerous shows exhibiting models of Rome, St Peter's, and the Falls of Tivoli: all rely on a mechanical imitation of reality.

Wordsworth's hostility towards the all-seeing nature of the panorama also derived from its ability to make every part of the world available for the easy consumption of the audience. The panorama, like the shows that exhibited models, reproduced 'All that the Traveller sees when he is there.' For Wordsworth, spiritual sustenance was achieved through an interactive relationship with the natural world, and the panorama and the model provided imitations that forestalled the need to visit the places they portrayed. As *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction* declared in 1832, 'By the aid of Mr Burford's panoramic pencil, the sight-hunter of our times may enjoy a kind of imaginary tour through the world' (Anon. 1832: 393–4). The panorama and the model encouraged a passive mode of viewing that was the antithesis to that of the peripatetic traveller.

Despite Wordsworth's dislike, the number of panoramas, cosmoramas, and magic lantern performances continued to grow rapidly during the first decades of the nineteenth century. Optical media could be found in pleasure gardens, theatres, bazaars, touring shows, and institutions devoted to popular science such as Royal Polytechnic in Regent Street (opened in 1838) and the Royal Adelaide Gallery near the Strand (opened in 1832). Coinciding with this growth, the 1830s and 1840s in particular saw an enormous expansion in popular publishing and cheap periodicals (see Altick 1998). Journals like the *Penny Magazine* (1832–45) and *Saturday Magazine* (1832–44) attempted to provide the same rational recreation as panoramas and dioramas. The simultaneous development of print and optical media led to numerous points of crossover. At its simplest this convergence is reflected in the titles of periodicals and books that attempted to feed off the success of the latest optical novelty. Relevant titles include *The Literary Panorama and National Register* (1806–19), *The Kaleidoscope: or, Literary and Scientific Mirror* (1818–31); *The Diorama, Or Amusing Sketches of Life and Manners* (1826), and *The Hibernia Magazine and Monthly Panorama* (1810–11).

The interaction between print and optical media also took place at a conceptual level in that writers used optical shows to figure either their relationship with readers or their readers' engagement with their text. These tropings emphasised contrary aspects of the reading experience. Reading was figured, alternatively, as an absorbing series of moving

scenes, as a process of detached observation, or as akin to a popular show. Whereas it was the passive experience of the panorama that aroused Wordsworth's distaste, this feature of optical recreations was seized upon as a structuring model by Pierce Egan for his *Life in London* (1821). Egan's *Life in London* was an enormous publishing success. It followed the riotous adventures of Corinthian Tom and Bob Logic as the former took his country cousin, Jerry Hawthorn, on a tour of the 'fast' haunts of the metropolitan underworld. Just as the various panoramas of London attempted to encompass the expanse of the city, Egan's desire to provide a guide to London low-life was keyed into his comparable assertion that the city was 'A Complete CYCLOPÆDIA where every man of the most religious or moral habits, attached to any sect, may find something to please his palate' (Egan 24). In chapter 2, Egan claimed that the book offered a camera obscura view of London. Reading the text was made analogous to viewing London through a camera obscura, primarily because it offered a detached, voyeuristic glimpse into dangerous London haunts:

The author, in consequence, has chosen for his readers a *Camera Obscura* view of London, not only from its safety, but because it is so *snug*, and also possesses the invaluable advantage of SEEING and not being *seen*. The author of the *Devil upon two Sticks*, it appears, preferred taking a *flight* over the houses for his remarks and views of society; but if I had adopted that mode of travelling, and perchance had fallen to the ground, an hospital might have been the reward of my presumption. (Egan 19)

Although the camera obscura was not a novel device at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it remained an instrument used to aid amateur sketching. Egan's correlation between reading and viewing exemplifies the way writers used methods inspired by optical devices, particularly when it came to narrating the fast-moving experience of city-life. Significantly, he also casts his method as an advance upon the realism of Alain René Le Sage's *Le Diable boiteux* (1707), translated as *The Devil Upon Two Sticks* (1708). In Le Sage's novel, the devil Asmodeus reveals the life of Madrid to Don Cleofas by lifting the roofs off all the houses. In contrast to this lofty approach, Egan's narrative goes down to street-level in order to reveal the secrets of London life. *Life in London* uses the camera obscura as a trope to signify a close-up realism, which yet keeps the reader at a safe distance.³

³ The French translation of *Life in London*, *Diorama Anglais, ou Promenades pittoresques à Londres*. . . . (1823), similarly draws an analogy between optical shows and Egan's method.

Other writers similarly used optical shows to envision their readers' relationship with their texts. At the end of Henry Ellison's *Emma: A Tale* (1839), a gothic romance in verse, Ellison describes his characters as akin to those seen in a Phantasmagoria show:

Reader, these Forms are but as Figures made
By a Phantasmagoria, briefly thrown
On Time's strange Canvass: with the Light and Shade
Of Fancy wrought; or like to Portraits shown
On some old Tapestry, and faded grown
Thro' the long Lapse of Years: at which you gaze
'Till each Face seems as that of one wellknown,
And full of Recollections; Fancy plays
Strange Tricks with us, and Phantoms at her will can raise!
(Ellison 232)

Ellison's tale included the apparition of long-dead medieval knights: the characters were thus particularly redolent of the ghostly figures that characterised the Phantasmagoria. The other principal feature of Phantasmagoria show was the way that, by using a magic lantern concealed behind a screen, ghosts could be made to appear and disappear, or made to seem to move either towards or away from the audience. Ellison equates the succession of projected figures in the Phantasmagoria with his readers' transient experience of his characters.

Whereas Ellison, like Rousseau, used optical tropes to materialise the imaginative engagement of his readers, Dickens used them to stress the way his novels functioned as popular entertainments. Dickens's fascination with London shows, particularly panoramas, is evident in several journalistic pieces. He published three articles on the London Colosseum for the *Morning Chronicle* in 1835, a piece on Banvard's American panorama for the *Examiner* in December 1848, and an article on panoramic journeys for *Household Words* in April 1850.⁴ In a fulfilment of Wordsworth's fears, the latter article celebrates the adventures of Mr Booley, a panoramic traveller who is able to visit the Arctic, India, and New Zealand, without ever having to leave the comfortable environs of London.

⁴ Charles Dickens, 'The Colosseum', *Morning Chronicle*, 7 July 1835; 'Grand Colosseum Fête', *Morning Chronicle*, 10 July 1835; 'The Reopening of the Colosseum', *Morning Chronicle*, 13 October 1835; 'The American Panorama', *Examiner*, 16 December 1848; 'Some Account of an Extraordinary Traveller', *Household Words*, 20 April 1850.

Grahame Smith (2003) has argued that Dickens's interest in optical recreations fed into his fictional technique. Yet it also produced a way of envisioning his relationship with his large readership. Nowhere is this more evident than at the end of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), where Dickens uses the moving panorama as a figure for both the imaginative journey of his readers and the novel's status as a public show. At the beginning of the final chapter, the narrator declares that 'The magic reel, which, rolling on before, has led the chronicler thus far, now slackens in its pace, and stops. It lies before the goal; the pursuit is at an end' (Dickens 1913: 504). The reader's passage through the novel, the 'magic reel', is equated with viewing a moving panorama, the dominant exhibition practice for panoramas from the 1820s. Moving panoramas consisted of a large painted canvas wound between two rollers, often accompanied by a narration from an accompanying lecturer. Dickens's use of the moving panorama clearly positions him as lecturer-cum-showman, whose role is to explain the moving scene passing before his readers. The pun on the magic reel also stresses, in a fashion akin to Rousseau, that the scenes experienced by his readers took place as much within their imagination as on the pages of the text.

Graphic artists from the period similarly used optical shows as a motif to stress the popular attraction of their work. This convergence between print, graphic, and optical media is evident in the frontispiece to volume four of Robert Seymour's *Sketches by Seymour* (c.1836). Figure 1 shows how Seymour presents the volume as a magic lantern show, much as Egan imagines his work as a camera obscura view. Seymour was a well-known illustrator and caricaturist of the 1830s, working on *Seymour's Comic Album* (1834), the *Squib Annual of Poetry, Politics, and Personalities* (1835) and *Figaro in London* (1831–8). He was also the initial illustrator for *The Pickwick Papers* until his engravings, initially conceived of as the central attraction, were, famously, upstaged by Dickens's narrative. *Sketches by Seymour* was a five-volume work containing comic illustrations of sporting jaunts and high japes, with a brief accompanying written narrative. Seymour's presentation of volume four as a comic magic lantern show emphasises the dominance of the visual attraction of his sketches in relation to the text. The reader moves from image to image, much as a magic lantern show moves successively from slide to slide. The title of the sketch, 'Galanty Show!', also positions Seymour as a popular showman in that it refers to the tradition of travelling peepshow and magic lantern showman.

In addition to materialising the work of the imagination, optical tropes recur in discussions of memory. They expressed not simply the