

Romanticism and Visuality

Fragments, History, Spectacle

Sophie Thomas

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
New York London

First published 2008
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business.

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Typeset in Sabon by IBT Global.
Printed and bound in the United States of America on acid-free paper by IBT Global.

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Thomas, Sophie, 1963–

Romanticism and visuality : fragments, history, spectacle / Sophie Thomas.
p. cm. — (Routledge studies in romanticism ; 10)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-415-96118-9 (hardback : alk. paper) 1. English literature—19th century—History and criticism. 2. Art and literature—Great Britain—History—19th century. 3. Visual perception in literature. 4. Imagination in literature. 5. Aesthetics in literature. 6. Romanticism--Great Britain. I. Title.

PR468.A76T47 2007
820.9'357—dc22

2007020344

ISBN10: 0-415-96118-1 (hbk)
ISBN10: 0-203-93782-1 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-96118-9 (hbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-203-93782-2 (ebk)

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10. Romanticism and Visuality

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Sophie Thomas

For Asa and Helen

Preface and Acknowledgments

This study addresses the interrelationship between literature and visual culture in the Romantic period, and it investigates how seeing was itself viewed, both by those involved in creating visual spectacle and by those who responded by writing about the status of the visual in literary texts. It interrogates a number of disputes over how seeing should “show itself” that are central to our understanding of Romantic literature and culture, and it assesses the importance of the invisible, of what eludes sight, to the new configurations of the visible made possible by visual technology.

The late eighteenth century appears remarkable to us now for the rapid and diverse expansion of the visual field, not only in the development of visual devices and entertainments that duplicated or fabricated encounters with the visual world, but also at the theatre, in the expanding market for art exhibitions, prints, and illustrated books, and even in connection with tourism associated with the rage for picturesque scenery. Moreover, the thriving popular culture of Regency Britain, with its phantasmagorias, panoramas, and dioramas, was driven not simply by the economic potential of newly profitable modes of mass entertainment, but also by a lively interest in the aesthetic and conceptual dimensions of looking. If at this time the English became a nation of “starers” I suggest that this was because the creation and control of the visual field was part of the novelty, part of what was being made and presented as spectacular. Daguerre’s Diorama, for example, with its clever creation of visual illusions, made its manipulations of the visible part of the show; and in many other contexts that I examine, both visual and textual, the act of seeing receives special emphasis by being itself represented or dramatized.

The responsiveness of Romantic writers to the expanding field of the visual is important not only for the contentious debates it has fuelled over the relative value of the imagined (the visionary) in relation to the seen (the merely visible), but for the pervasive ambivalence that inflects treatments of the visual at this time. Anxiety about seeing arguably stands in for broader anxieties, such as those regarding historical truth and knowledge, and the purpose and longevity of art. Questions mediated by visual evidence, such as aesthetic illusion, the counterfeit and the status of the real, appear to have become more pressing, and more difficult to resolve in the wake of the new visual media. This interest

in the broader problems encapsulated and re-presented by the visual was also highly productive. I argue that what is commonly thought to be the Romantic resistance to the visible reveals a generative fascination with the visual and its conceptual as well as sensory—even spectacular—possibilities.

While the individual chapters of this book are necessarily selective and address a range of discrete topics, they all contribute to a network of inter-related themes: representation, memory, fragmentation, time, and historicity. These themes are related to acts of “making visible” and are implicit in the attention throughout to the border between the visible and the invisible. Nowhere though is this border more potent than in instances of fragmentation and ruin, where an object (or indeed an idea) is simultaneously absent and present, engaging the viewer with a tangible and visible limit, beyond which she or he is invited but may not pass. Chapters in the earlier part of this study focus on ruins and fragments, and their attempts to make the past, or the historical, appear in the present. From the mock-ruins of the later eighteenth century, to views of Rome in the Romantic period, to the popularity of scenes of Gothic ruin at the Diorama, the visual material of these chapters is largely physical. In other chapters however, the literary engagement with the visual is emphasized, and the subjects of these chapters range from Wordsworth and Shelley’s different modes of visual idealism, to the staging of the visual in Coleridge’s play *Remorse*, to the figure of the Medusa in Shelley and at the phantasmagoria, to Keats’s exploration of vision and visibility in the *Hyperion* fragments. This study explicitly juxtaposes fragmentation and visibility, and argues that fragmentation and ruin relate closely to the visual in articulating questions about history and temporality, and in bringing Romantic preoccupations with the past into clearer focus.

Portions of this study have been published elsewhere and I am pleased to be able to include them here. Part of Chapter 3 first appeared in *European Romantic Review*, 14:2 (2003), as “Assembling History: Fragments and Ruins.” My thanks go to Taylor & Francis for permission to reproduce it (<http://www.informaworld.com>). An earlier version of Chapter 6, “Making Visible: The Diorama, the Double, and the (Gothic) Subject,” was published electronically on the University of Maryland’s *Romantic Circles* website (2005). Chapter 7, “Seeing Things (‘as they are’): Coleridge, Schiller, and the Play of Semblance” first appeared in *Studies in Romanticism*, 43:4 (2004), and I would like to thank the Trustees of Boston University for permission to revise and reprint it. Finally, I am grateful to Oxford University Press for permission to incorporate into Chapter 2 some of the material from my article on the fragment in *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide* (2005).

This book has benefited immeasurably from the support of many, individuals and institutions alike. Research funds and study leave granted by the School of Humanities at the University of Sussex made it possible to complete this work; and I would also like to acknowledge the British Academy, from whom I received a grant to cover the cost of the illustrations. For assistance with picture research, I would like to thank Lucy Jenkins. I would also like to

thank the editorial and production team at Routledge, for their interest in the project and for their extraordinary efficiency and helpfulness.

I am most deeply indebted however to the many people who have encouraged and supported this project, from its earliest forms to its current shape, and would like particularly to thank Lucy Newlyn, Paul Hamilton, Alan Bewell, Rebecca Comay, Anne Janowitz, Nicholas Roe, Mary Jacobus, Andrew Bennett, and Luisa Calè. The best parts of this work owe much to the interdisciplinary research culture at Sussex, and I would like to express thanks and appreciation to my colleagues, some of whom have heard, read and commented on segments of this research over recent years: Vincent Quinn, Laura Marcus, Nick Royle, Lindsay Smith, Jenny Taylor, Vicky Lebeau, and Steph Newell. For their incisive reading of the entire manuscript, and a wealth of constructive advice, I owe a deep debt of thanks to Nigel Llewellyn, Christopher Rovee, and Julian Patrick.

Many friends have made this work possible, in personal and often practical ways, and I would particularly like to thank Judy Hirshorn, Penny Lock and Emilia Bolin Ransom for unstinting support. My family has of course been the longest suffering, and any thanks offered here are paltry in comparison to what I have received, from my parents and siblings, from my partner and children. Asa and Helen have put up patiently with a distracted mother, and sustained me in turn with their charm, inventiveness, and humour. To Julian, for love, friendship and intellectual collaboration over many happy years, I owe everything.

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1 Introduction

Regarding Visuality—From the Picturesque to the Panorama

In his *Salon* of 1767, Diderot, under the briefest of titles—“Small, Very Small Ruin”—embarks upon an extended description of a painting by Hubert Robert. These are just the first sentences of a skilful verbal sketch that takes its reader through every imaginable visual detail of the work:

To the right, the sloping roof of a shed set against a wall. Beneath this shed covered with straw, barrels, some of them evidently full and on their sides, others empty and upright. Above the roof, the remainder of the wall, damaged and covered with parasitic plants. To the extreme left, at the top of this wall, a bit of a columned balustrade in ruins.¹

And in this vein he continues, as though conjuring it into being himself, designating for each element its rightful place: “On the balustrade a pot of flowers.” Or: “To the extreme left, the door of a house; within the house, leaning on the lower half of the door, a woman observing the activity in the street” (201). At first sight, so to speak, a comprehensive word-picture emerges of Robert’s painting.

Diderot, however, uses this instance—it is not clear whether it is the painting or his description itself that is the subject of his reflections—as an example of the problems both of describing and of understanding, or comprehending, a description. The greater the number of details, he suggests, the greater is the difference between the actual image and the one imagined by the reader: a surfeit of detail obscures rather than clarifies the image. Diderot moves from these difficulties to a meditation on the difference between seeing and imagining, suggesting that the eye and the imagination “play across the same field.” But then again, he speculates, perhaps it would be more accurate to state that “the field of the imagination is inversely proportioned to that of the eye” (202). These are important reflections, not only for their attempt to think through the relation of the visible to the imaginary, but because the audience for whom Diderot was writing did not and probably would not ever see the original artworks for themselves. His *Salon* commentaries were thus a substitute, a supplement, for sight, and as Thomas Crow has argued, this absence or disappearance of the object “announces”

2 Romanticism and Visuality

the modern conditions of art viewing, which remain largely dependent on memory: full comprehension of the work of art can be arrived at only, he suggests, retrospectively, after its unfolding in memory, but also in recognition of the loss of the object.² An invisible painting of a ruin—invisible, that is, to Diderot's imagined reader—is a potent reminder of that distance. But this small (very small) narrative points in another, though related direction: to the way the question of the visible is shaped by the invisible, and with it, brings into view the limits of what can be perceived.

I

It is the central contention of this study that representations of seeing, and displays of the “invisible,” speak for an acute interest in the conceptual and epistemological as well as cultural questions thrown up by vision and the visible at the turn of the nineteenth century. This book is not concerned with optics, or with the science of vision as such.³ Rather, it investigates a variety of instances in literature and visual culture where “seeing” becomes a preoccupation that is simultaneously material and thematic. In the Romantic period, this preoccupation takes on apparently distinct forms: in a thriving visual culture that trades on (and trumps) prevailing aesthetic models, and in a literary culture that, at first sight, denigrates the visual. The former, at least, is not an entirely new development in the period, for as Peter de Bolla's work has shown, it was in the middle years of the eighteenth century that “the culture of visibility” became visible for the first time.⁴ Mid-eighteenth-century Britain was obsessed, de Bolla argues, with “visibility, spectacle, display.” And this obsession is apparent in the extraordinary array of diversions available to the eighteenth-century spectator that he catalogues: public hangings (and other spectacles of punishment), theatrical performances, art exhibitions, masquerades, fireworks, dances, fêtes champêtres, scientific demonstrations, and much more.⁵ From portraiture to the visual entertainments of Vauxhall Gardens, looking becomes a more conscious and culturally inflected act, with a range of new practices and forms of representation: looking itself becomes visible.

At the other end of the Romantic period, in Victorian Britain, a powerful fascination with the act of seeing persists. This is the territory charted by Kate Flint's interdisciplinary study, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, which examines many facets of the Victorians' attitude toward sight, from scientific advances illuminating the relationship of eye to brain, to new optical instruments and technologies of spectatorship. Flint's interest is as much in the problem of decipherment as in practices of observation: in an awareness of the limits of vision, and the tantalizing presence of the unseen, which even inventions such as the microscope and the photograph did little to resolve.⁶ Flint argues that a number of prominent Victorian pre-occupations—from attention to physiognomy and related detail, to modes

of symbolic realism evident in the paintings of the pre-Raphaelites and in literary texts such as those of Dickens and Eliot—broach the question of the invisible as much as they evince the importance of visibility, and the perhaps more prevalent drive toward specularity. Interest in the unconscious, in mysteries of identity, in what lies buried under cities such as London: all of these suggest a potent threat implicit in the presence of the invisible.⁷ Not to be able to see, moreover, evokes the domains of the imagination and of memory, which Flint suggests operated on Victorian sensibilities as a powerful legacy of Romanticism.

Clearly, the turn toward the invisible that animated the nineteenth century—as a cultural preoccupation and a source of anxiety—has its roots in preceding decades. These decades, spanning roughly the period 1780 to 1825, saw increased attention to the place of the invisible, in the midst of an equally strong cultural investment in all things visible. The prominence of figurative and metaphoric uses of sight in literary texts of the period argues, moreover, for an interest in acts of seeing that intersected, often producing conflicting effects, with a correspondent interest in acts of the imagination. In the Romantic period, there is a more palpable antagonism between visual display and imaginative endeavour—an antagonism, however, that is not simply negative or combative, but generative. When Romantic texts are situated alongside emerging visual media, it becomes possible to “see” the impact made by the paradigms and procedures of visual modes on the writing of the period. However, this study further contends that those visual modes were conceived in terms that emphasized, in a thematic as well as material way, the very nature and limits of visibility. Adapting a formulation from W. J. T. Mitchell’s recent study, *What Do Pictures Want?*, I argue that what is at stake is how seeing itself should be seen—and shown.⁸

Recent studies have begun to explore the significance of prominent visual modes for larger cultural debates. Gillen D’Arcy Wood, for example, in *The Shock of the Real*, points to a widening gulf between Romantic theories of artistic production that emphasized original genius and an idealized view of the imagination, and a burgeoning visual culture industry that traded on mass reproduction, spectacle, and simulation.⁹ Wood argues that when viewed in this context, much Romantic aesthetic ideology is really a reaction not, or not only, to the Enlightenment rationalism of the eighteenth century, but to the coming into being of the visual culture of modernity, with the profound and at times perplexing paradigm shifts that it produced. It was, he argues, the growing bourgeois taste for visual novelty and spectacles of the “real” that prompted the largely negative high-brow reaction to the mimetic representationalism of displays such as “Belzoni’s Tomb,” mounted at Bullock’s London Museum in 1821. This popular exhibition, after which the museum was renamed the “Egyptian Hall,” staged a lurid and sensational mock-up of tombs, statues, and sarcophagi recently excavated from the Valley of the Kings. The eye of the visitor was gratified by a thrilling and extravagant simulacrum of the real, rather than by a disinterested display