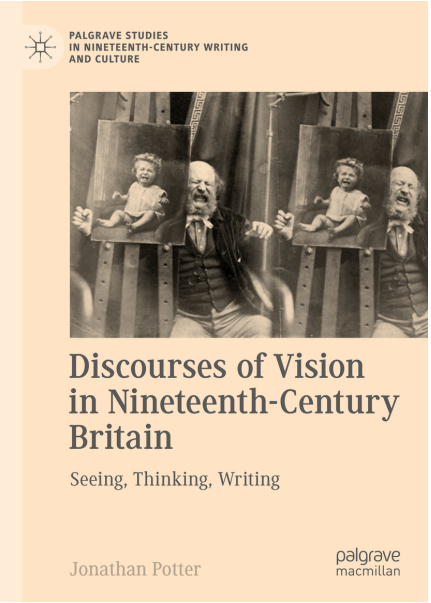
BOOK REVIEW

Discourses of Vision in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Seeing, Thinking, Writing, by Jonathan Potter (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). 269 pp. Hardback, £59.99.

Reviewed by Treena Kay Warren
(*Independent Scholar*)



Have you ever considered a view to be 'panoramic', described a sunset as 'kaleidoscopic', or marveled at the 'magic' of cinematic projections? Visual technologies and entertainments, such as the panorama, the kaleidoscope, and the magic lantern, profoundly affected the Victorian cultural imagination. So much so, they are still embedded in the way we conceptualise, and referenced in the way we articulate, what we see today.

The ongoing endurance of such metaphors is testament to the importance of Jonathan Potter's *Discourses of Vision in Nineteenth-Century Britain,* a revealing exploration of how the interplay between experiences of optical technologies and their textual interpretation influenced Victorian understandings of visual perception, in which the origins of our own ways of seeing can be traced. While scholars of nineteenth-century visual culture, such as Isobel Armstrong, Kate Flint, and Martin Willis, have considered the cultural reverberations of optical toys and instruments, Potter's sustained interrogation of the specifically literary landscape surrounding visual invention is a valuable addition to the field. Potter delves deeply into the Victorian collective conscience, specifically in Britain, and offers fresh insight into the ways in which visual technologies shaped thought and experience throughout the era.[1]

Potter asserts that the influence of new visual technologies on processes of perception and expression was amplified by the nineteenth-century boom in print culture, which enabled the dissemination of textual accounts of visual experience on a mass scale. This entwining of direct, and mediated, experiences of visual technologies informed both visual and spatio-temporal experience for the nineteenth-century audiences that consumed them, since 'the way one perceived the world, and the way one expressed that perception, had deep implications for what one felt, thought, and imagined about the world, and also about one's self' (p. 11). Specific visual technologies offered a commonly-understood framework or point of reference, around

[1] See Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Martin Willis, *Vision, Science and Literature 1870-1920: Ocular Horizons* (London: Routledge, 2011).

which visual discourse could form. Potter's argument is built from detailed examinations of some of these optical devices, and their literary representation, evoking the novelty and excitement they must have generated for their early audiences.

Invented in the eighteenth century, the panorama was a 360-degree painted illusion, commonly depicting a landscape, cityscape, or battle scene, which was displayed wrapped around a central viewing platform, within a specially designed circular room. By combining the vast visual scope of an elevated view with highly intricate detail, panoramas strove to create an immersive illusion of reality, which might transport the audience to the Roman Colosseum, or to Paris by night. As a media technology that attempted to manifest a totalising gaze that could not only see everything, but see everything at once, the panorama was discursively aligned with the concept of objective realism and the desire for rationality, control, and order. In contrast, the magic lantern, with its flitting projections of ethereal forms and seemingly supernatural displays of 'phantasmagoria', was associated with the fluid, the mutable, and the irrational in thought and perception, particularly with 'the highly subjective visions of dreams' (p. 72). Potter evidences these correlations with a rich array of textual readings, bringing together the work of Dickens, Carlyle, G.H. Lewes, Henry Mayhew, and articles from popular periodicals, that position visual technologies as an important contributing factor in shaping these opposing trends in nineteenth-century thought.

A visual device that did not correspond so neatly to either logical-empirical or intuitive-intangible modes of understanding was the stereoscope. Invented in 1838, this optical toy was operated by using two images (usually photographs) taken at slightly different angles that, when directed to each eye separately, combined to recreate binocular vision and form the illusion of three-dimensional space. While this effect heightened the perceived realism of the image, adding a sense of solidity and spatial depth, the apparatus itself necessitated a private and sustained gaze that invited the viewer to enter another world, stimulating imaginative engagement and the construction of narrative – particularly as a way of negotiating a series of images, loosely linked by subject or theme. An especially fascinating aspect of the stereoscope was the cognitive dissonance it generated between the obviously flat card images and the ostensible three-dimensional vision perceived through the eyepiece. This peculiar effect, in turn, foregrounded a philosophical dilemma regarding the properties of reality. It gave rise to the question as to whether form and space were mental constructs, as Kant had contended – and which the stereoscope seemed to confirm, since it showed how this might be perceived when they were obviously not present – or whether depth and solidity were fundamental properties of a physical environment perceived directly by the eye. As both a scientific instrument and a vehicle of imaginative escape, as both a popular parlour toy and an item of metaphysical debate, the stereoscope transgressed epistemological borders and opened a subversive cultural space between 'science and religion; supernatural and natural; rational and irrational' (p. 150).

As the century progressed, optical media that was once exciting and novel became widespread and, now readily accessible, was 'increasingly used in amateur contexts', meaning 'their applications became more varied, and their effects more diverse' (p. 189). This circumstance was paralleled by the proliferation of printed material, through which information had accumulated to a point that necessitated a

typological system, whereby literature was comprehended in terms of genre or form, and structured as a 'multifaceted web of meanings' rather than a unified location of truth (p. 193). Visual technologies played a role in effecting the shift from objective materialism to subjective narrative by way of a 'disintegration of knowledge into a 'fractal episteme' (p. 213), and thereby emphasising and facilitating the role of the imaginative in perceptual experience. By the turn of the century, bringing the advent of early cinema, the confluence of technology and imagination was cemented to the extent that new technologies could invoke imaginative association by referencing former technologies, as seen in the 1903 film, *La Lanterne Magigue* (*The Magic Lantern*), by (former magician) Georges Méliès: a piece of early cinema that constructs the fantasy world of a child through depicting the theatre and illusion associated with the magic lantern. *Discourses of Vision in Nineteenth-Century Britain* serves as a thoroughly researched and lucidly argued study of the complex processes by which this circumstance came about.

Bibliography

Armstrong, Isobel, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Flint, Kate, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Willis, Martin, *Vision, Science and Literature 1870-1920: Ocular Horizons* (London: Routledge, 2011).