



Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture

Jonathan Crary

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"Suspensions of Perception" is a major historical study of human attention and its volatile role in modern Western culture. It argues that the ways in which we intently look at or listen to anything result from crucial changes in the nature of perception that can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century.

Focusing on the period from about 1880 to 1905, Jonathan Crary examines the connections between the modernization of subjectivity and the dramatic expansion and industrialization of visual/auditory culture. At the core of his project is the paradoxical nature of modern attention, which was both a fundamental condition of individual freedom, creativity, and experience and a central element in the efficient functioning of economic and disciplinary institutions as well as the emerging spaces of mass consumption and spectacle.

Crary approaches these issues through multiple analyses of single works by three key modernist painters -- Manet, Seurat, and Cezanne -- who each engaged in a singular confrontation with the disruptions, vacancies, and rifts within a perceptual field. Each in his own way discovered that sustained attentiveness, rather than fixing or securing the world, led to perceptual disintegration and loss of presence, and each used this discovery as the basis for a reinvention of representational practices.

"Suspensions of Perception" decisively relocates the problem of aesthetic contemplation within a broader collective encounter with the unstable nature of perception -- in psychology, philosophy, neurology, early cinema, and photography. In doing so, it provides a historical framework for understanding the current social crisis of attention amid the accelerating metamorphoses of our contemporary technological culture.

Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture Details

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From Reader Review Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture for online ebook

Rhys says

I enjoyed the first chapter very much, as Crary sets up some interesting perspectives on attention and spectacle during the transformation to 'modern' society. He introduces the relationship between attention and the discipline required for labour in a capitalism economy. He also relates the spectacle to a disempowered subject.

And using paintings as a platform to discuss perception was well done, though it seemed at times that he had to pry open his discussion to fit in his stated theses.

"The idea of subjective vision – the notion that our perceptual and sensory experience depends less on the nature of an external stimulus than on the composition and functioning of our sensory apparatus – was one of the conditions for the historical emergence of notions of autonomous vision, that is, for a severing (or liberation) of perceptual experience from a necessary relation to an exterior world. Equally important, the rapid accumulation of knowledge about the workings of a fully embodied observer disclosed possible ways that vision was open to procedures of normalization, of quantification, of discipline" (p.12).

Neil Peterson says

"This book is an attempt to sketch some outlines of a genealogy of attention from the nineteenth century and to detail its role in the modernization of subjectivity. More concretely, I will examine how ideas about perception and attention were transformed in the late nineteenth century alongside the emergence of new technological forms of spectacle, display, projection, attraction, and recording." p2

Jean says

Who knew there were so many ways to "pay attention"-- and so many thing to pay attention to? The first chapter is great, but the overarching focus on paintings doesn't quite work for me, despite the perceptiveness of the individual readings and Crary's protestations about the level playing field of culture.

Sarah says

I find this more convincing than his Techniques of the Observer, though I still find it infuriating how blind Crary is to issues of race and gender.

"[T]he management of attention, whether through early mass-cultural forms in the late nineteenth century or later through the television set or the computer monitor (at least in their overwhelmingly pervasive forms), has little to do with the visual contents of these screens and far more with a larger strategy of the individual. Spectacle is not primarily concerned with a looking at images but rather with the construction of conditions

that individuate, immobilize, and separate subjects, even within a world in which mobility and circulation are ubiquitous."

.....so, uh, is he saying I should stop spending so much time on Facebook?

William West says

You'll never look at a Seurat painting the same way again!

Angela Randall says

I found this on a reading list for a course on multi-tasking, attention and distraction in a digital world. Both the book and the course look interesting.

Luke says

Heavily reliant on continental philosophy, almost to the point where it reads as pseudo-science. Maybe this book has a decent argument somewhere (beyond "our modern understandings of 'perception' or 'attention' have their roots in the new visual experiences of the late nineteenth century"--which makes sense in itself, but I can't evaluate the argument), but it's impenetrable to me. I'll have to pick it up again later.
