10. Shelly Jarenski, *Immersive Words: Mass Media, Visuality, and American Literature,* 1839–1893 (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015) and Marit Grøtta, *Baudelaire's Media Aesthetics: The Gaze of the Flâneur and Nineteenth-Century Media* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

Visuality

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IF vision was the master-sense of the nineteenth century, then scholars today have worked to critique that hegemony. Following Michel Foucault, they have shown how items of Victorian visual culture channeled the power of science, medicine, or the State in enforcing social norms. The mug shot, the colonial archive, the eugenic visual experiment, the photographed hysteric: all of these served to document and regulate what Foucault calls the "anatomo-politics of the human body."[1]

The twentieth-century hostility to the visual sense for its associations with domination and control has something in common with nineteenth-century texts that challenged the deceptive quality of appearances in favor of inner truths.[2] As Kate Flint notes, even while Victorian fiction lavishly recreated "the visible details of a crowded material world," that vision was constantly being contested by fiction that "encouraged readers to think, critically and skeptically, about the category of the visual itself."[3] This skepticism expressed itself in "a refusal to be satisfied with the representation of surfaces."[4] *Jane Eyre* exemplifies just this kind of suspicion, as it proposes a moral gaze that sees through deceitful, alluring surfaces. When the young Mr. Rochester meets Bertha Mason for the first time, he is ensnared by the mirage of her beauty, as she is shown off to him by scheming family members. Only after their marriage will he learn the terrifying truth about her character. By contrast, "plain Jane" possesses no external beauty; her attractions emanate from within. Victorian novels often teach us to disbelieve illusionistic or attractive surfaces, encouraging us to seek deeper meaning beyond the visible.

Writers and thinkers from the nineteenth century onward can therefore be seen as united in accusing the visual sense of immorality, critiquing its intrinsic superficiality and reductiveness, its adherence to mere

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externals, its offer of a quick path to unjust conclusions about identity and otherness.

For the remainder of this short essay, however, I would like to propose a counterdiscourse of Victorian visuality, one that dwells in the perverse surface. For even while a novel like *Jane Eyre* asserts the deep self in truths beyond superficial beauty, the novel also burns with the desire of the eyes, glorying in visual pleasure and intense visual sensation as a form of self-authorization and self-assertion.

Foucault's model of vision invokes qualities of reason, control, and categorization—elements emerging from the Enlightenment, when philosophers fused seeing and knowing into a singular idea.[5] A Descartian account linked the mind's eye and the eye's mind, making vision into an eminently logical operation, one of abstraction and objectification. Jonathan Crary labels this model as "classical vision," epitomized by the *camera obscura* and an empiricist idea that "observation leads to truthful inferences about the world."[6]

In *Jane Eyre*, however, the gaze of power is displaced by the gaze of the governess.[7] Unlike Foucault's panopticon, a model of powerful vision from above, the novel offers a polymorphous visuality from below, or at eyelevel. Crary describes nineteenth-century "postclassical" vision as sited in the body, operating through flawed, corporeal eyeballs. Crary studies Goethe's experiments on his own eyes, as the German philosopher noted weird illusory flecks, colors, and afterimages swimming across his visual field. The embodied, postclassical model of vision seems especially apt for a novel like *Jane Eyre*, defined by its extreme physicality. With characters subject to hunger, sickness, fainting, fits, burning, biting, stabbing, flogging, freezing, or dying, visuality takes its place in this milieu as a deeply enfleshed and organic process. Approaching the novel from this angle might prompt us to ask what *Jane Eyre* has in common with the paintings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, as both offer scorching visions of proximate, desired bodies.[8]

The countervisuality of *Jane Eyre* helps us to understand some of the novel's contradictions. In one repeated pattern, Jane critiques hypocrites, or those who judge by surface appearances, even while she invests surface visions and physical sensations with a deep affective intensity. Hence her obsessive attention to character appearances and physiognomies, from John Reed's "dingy and unwholesome skin," to Miss Temple's "fine penciling of long lashes" around her eyes, to St. John Rivers's "lofty forehead, still and pale as a white stone."[9] Jane's powerful emotions are rendered

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according to a wild and rampant visuality. While Rochester banters with female guests in his drawing room, Jane looks at him hungrily:

> [M]y eyes were drawn involuntarily to his face; I could not keep their lids under control: they would rise, and the irids would fix on him. I looked, and had an acute pleasure in looking,—a precious yet poignant pleasure; pure gold, with a steely point of agony: a pleasure like what the thirst-perishing man might feel who knows the well to which he has crept is poisoned, yet stoops and drinks divine draughts nevertheless.

She feels her eyeballs as organs in her own body, with eyelids, irises, all irresistibly drawn to the spectacular desired body. Her forbidden vision feels like an irrational, driving thirst. Rochester's features, meanwhile—the "massive brow," "jetty eyebrows, deep eyes"—all produce "an influence that quite mastered me." The eye of the governess transgresses class divides and respectable modesty, losing itself in the mad pleasure imparted by the sight of the beloved's face.

While this example inscribes *Jane Eyre* within a familiar narrative of heterosexual desire, another, perhaps even more crucial moment dislodges our sense of vision's heteronormative role in the novel. I return to an episode in the Lowood school, to a formative moment in Jane's childhood, and an exemplary illustration of the novel's intensely physicalized visual experience. The tyrant Mr. Brocklehurst has instructed the entire school to direct its gaze upon Jane, whom he will denounce as a liar: "I felt their eyes directed like burning-glasses against my scorched skin." In punishment, Jane is hoisted upon a stool and "exposed to general view on a pedestal of infamy." The school's shame-inducing gaze renders itself like a flame scorching Jane's skin. Yet her agony upon the stool is mitigated by the solidarity offered by her fellow schoolgirls, in a passage that plays out as an interweaving of gazes, feelings, sensations, and passionate visual metaphors:

> What my sensations were no language can describe; but just as they all rose, stifling my breath and constricting my throat, a girl came up and passed me: in passing, she lifted her eyes. What a strange light inspired them! What an extraordinary sensation that ray sent through me! How the new feeling bore me up! It was as if a martyr, a hero, had passed a slave or victim, and imparted strength in the transit. I mastered the rising hysteria, lifted up my head, and took a firm stand on the stool. Helen Burns asked some slight question about her work of Miss Smith, was chidden for the triviality of the inquiry, returned to her place, and smiled at me as she again went by. What a smile! I remember it now, and I know that it was the effluence of fine intellect, of true courage; it lit up her marked lineaments, her thin face, her

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> sunken grey eye, like a reflection from the aspect of an angel. Yet at that moment Helen Burns wore on her arm "the untidy badge;" scarcely an hour ago I had heard her condemned by Miss Scatcherd to a dinner of bread and water on the morrow because she had blotted an exercise in copying it out. Such is the imperfect nature of man! such spots are there on the disc of the clearest planet; and eyes like Miss Scatcherd's can only see those minute defects, and are blind to the full brightness of the orb.

Again, the passage warns against judging by external appearances—in this case, the "untidy badge" on Helen's arm, the blots in her copybook, her sunken grey eye, all like spots on a planet's surface. But the countering claims for value are also rendered visually, with an intensely physical exchange of glances. The "strange light" of a girl's eyes produces an "extraordinary sensation" in Jane's body. The passage renders feelings of solidarity in suffering through a deeply physicalized visuality. Helen's angelic, beatific nature is compared to a glowing planet with spots, but the metaphor doesn't quite stay metaphorical: Jane's body registers the thrill of mutual sightlines as emanations from brilliant visual surfaces. We can read here a queer intensity of exchanged female gazes, mixing desire with the politics of solidarity and insurrection. I would even point to a kind of material Christianity, a heavenly goodness immanent in bodies and gazes, which counters our usual sense of Christian visuality as one of exegetical looking-through, dividing spirit from body.

Jane Eyre's intense affect surrounding the act of looking might prompt a return to some of the book's more familiar visual tropes—for example, its relentless ekphrasis, in Jane's hallucinatory drawings, or in the picture-books she reads as a child. Rather than understanding these items merely as symbolic icons to be decoded, we might also see them as contributing to the novel's physicalized visuality, registering according to their own vivid materiality. That Jane's drawings come from her imagination, rather than "from life," seems newly important, since they give substance to the ephemeral workings of her mind, concretizing thought as the suggestive lineaments of an image, to be seen and questioned by the curious eyes of others. The racist spectacle of Bertha's purple face emblematizes the power of bodily seeing and feeling, not repressed, but written on the body's surface. In *Jane Eyre*'s obsessive looking-at, looking-upon, looking-through, the novel offers a moral lesson about deceptive surfaces, but perhaps more insistently, it depicts the entwining of visual experience with strong feelings, either repulsive, or, more often, pleasurable, making vision into a self-creating act whose moral payoff is not quite as evident.

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Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 139. See, among others, Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); and Daniel A. Novak, *Realism, Photography, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Kate Flint offers a definitive account of Victorian visuality in *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
2. Martin Jay traces French theory's hostility to visuality in *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
3. Kate Flint, "'Seeing is believing?': Visuality and Victorian Fiction," in *A Concise Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Francis O'Gorman (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 37, 43.
4. Flint, "'Seeing is believing?,'" 37.
5. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1977; rpt., New York: Vintage Books, 1995).
6. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 29.
7. Peter J. Bellis takes a more traditional approach in arguing that *Jane Eyre* dramatizes a "conflict between two different modes of vision: a penetrating male gaze that fixes and defines the woman as its object, and a marginal female perception that would conceal or withhold itself from the male" (639). See Peter J. Bellis, "In the Window-Seat: Vision and Power in *Jane Eyre*," *English Literary History* 54, no. 3 (1987): 639–42.
8. Dennis Denisoff, in *Sexual Visuality From Literature To Film 1850–1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), argues that late-Victorian literary works destabilized sex and gender norms through moments of queer or sexualized visuality, especially via literary portraits of artists.
9. All quotations are taken from Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847; Project Gutenberg online edition, 2007).

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