A CENTENNIAL BOOK

One hundred books
published between 1990 and 1995
bear this special imprint of
the University of California Press.
We have chosen each Centennial Book
as an example of the Press's finest
publishing and bookmaking traditions
as we celebrate the beginning of
our second century.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
Founded in 1893

Downcast Eyes

THE DENIGRATION OF VISION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY FRENCH THOUGHT

Martin Jay

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
BERKELEY LOS ANGELES LONDON

Introduction

Even a rapid glance at the language we commonly use will demonstrate the ubiquity of visual metaphors. If we actively focus our attention on them, vigilantly keeping an eye out for those deeply embedded as well as those on the surface, we can gain an illuminating insight into the complex mirroring of perception and language. Depending, of course, on one's outlook or point of view, the prevalence of such metaphors will be accounted an obstacle or an aid to our knowledge of reality. It is, however, no idle speculation or figment of imagination to claim that if blinded to their importance, we will damage our ability to inspect the world outside and introspect the world within. And our prospects for escaping their thrall, if indeed that is even a foreseeable goal, will be greatly dimmed. In lieu of an exhaustive survey of such metaphors, whose scope is far too broad to allow an easy synopsis, this opening paragraph should suggest how ineluctable the modality of the visual actually is, at least in our linguistic practice. I hope by now that you, *optique lecteur*, can see what I mean.[1]

1. There are some twenty-one visual metaphors in this paragraph, many of them embedded in words that no longer seem directly dependent on them. Thus, for example, *vigilant* is derived from the Latin *vigilare*, to watch, which in its French form *veiller* is the root of *surveillance*. *Demonstrate* comes from the Latin *monstrare*, to show. *Inspect, prospect, introspect* (and other words like *aspect* or *circumspect*) all derive from the Latin *specere*, to look at or observe. *Speculate* has the same root. *Scope* comes from the Latin *scopium*, a translation of a Greek word for to look at or examine. *Synopsis* is from the Greek word for general view. These are latent or dead metaphors,

Other Western languages also contain a wealth of examples to buttress the point. No German, for instance, can miss the *Augen* in *Augenblick* or the *Schau* in *Anschauung*, nor can a Frenchman fail to hear the *voir* in both *savoir* and *pouvoir*.[2] And if this is so with ordinary language, it is no less the case with the specialized languages intellectuals have designed to lift us out of the commonsensical understanding of the world around us. As Ian Hacking and Richard Rorty have recently emphasized, even Western philosophy at its most putatively disinterested and neutral can be shown to be deeply dependent on occluded visual metaphors.[3]

In addition to the ocular permeation of language, there exists a wealth of what might be called visually imbued cultural and social practices, which may vary from culture to culture and epoch to epoch. Sometimes these can be construed in grandiose terms, such as a massive shift from an oral culture to a "chirographic" one based on writing and then a typographic one in which the visual bias of the intermediate stage is even more firmly entrenched.[4] On a more modest level, anthropologists and sociologists have examined such visually fraught phenomena as the widespread belief in the evil eye, which has given rise to a no less popular series of countervailing apotropaic remedies.[5] Somewhere in between, historians of technology have pondered the implications of our expanded capacity to see through such devices as the telescope, microscope, camera, or cinema. What has been called the expansion of our "exosomatic organs"[6] has meant above all extending the range of our vision, compensating for its imperfections, or finding substitutes for its limited powers. These expansions have themselves been linked in complicated ways to the practices of surveillance and spectacle, which they often abet.

Because of the remarkable range and variability of visual practices, many commentators have been tempted, in ways that we will examine shortly, to claim certain cultures or ages have been "ocularcentric,"[7] or "dominated" by vision. For them, what may seem a function of our physiology or evolution is best understood in historical terms, with the obvious conclusion often drawn that we can reverse the effects of that domination. Anthropological evidence of radical variations in the intersensory mix of different cultures has been adduced to encourage such an outcome.[8]

But as in so many other similar debates, the threshold between what is "natural" and what is "cultural" is by no means easy to fix with any cer-

but they still express the sedimented importance of the visual in the English language. For a discussion of dormant visual metaphors, see Colin Murray Turbayne, *The Myth of Metaphor* (Columbia, S.C., 1971).

2. The French etymologies for these words are, to be sure, different—*voir* coming from the Latin *videre*, *savoir* from *sapere*, and *pouvoir* from *potere*. But sometimes imagined etymologies reveal as much as real ones. For a consideration of this theme, see Derek Attridge, "Language as History/History as Language: Saussure and the Romance of Etymology," in *Post-structuralism and the Question of History*, ed. Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington, and Robert Young (Cambridge, 1987). That the connections were made is shown by the film theorist Thierry Kuntzel's essay "Savoir, pouvoir, voir," *Ça Cinéma*, 7–8 (May, 1975).

3. Ian Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* (Cambridge, 1975); Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1979). For a discussion of the link between knowledge and sight in all Indo-European tongues, see Stephen A. Tyler, "The Vision Quest in the West, or What the Mind's Eye Sees," *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 40, 1 (Spring, 1984), pp. 23–39. He shows that at least one other language family, Dravidian, lacks this linkage.

4. For arguments of this kind, see Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven, 1967); Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge, 1977); and Donald M. Lowe, *History of Bourgeois Perception* (Chicago, 1982).

5. For recent studies of the evil eye, see Clarence Maloney, ed., *The Evil Eye* (New York, 1976); Lawrence Di Stasi, *Mal Occhio: The Underside of Vision* (San Francisco, 1981); and Tobin Siebers, *The Mirror of Medusa* (Berkeley, 1983). For an account of apotropaic responses to it, see Albert M. Potts, *The World's Eye* (Lexington, Ky., 1982).

6. Robert E. Innis, "Technics and the Bias of Perception," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 10, 1 (Summer, 1984), p. 67. Although visual "prostheses" appear to be the most significant extension of human sense organs, such inventions as the telephone, loudspeaker, stethoscope, and sonar demonstrate that hearing has also been exosomatically enhanced. The other senses have perhaps not been as fortunate.

7. As is the case with many neologisms, "ocularcentric" or "ocularcentrism" is sometimes spelled differently in the literature. Often it is rendered "oculocentric," or less frequently "ocularocentric." In previous publications I have followed the first of these usages and will remain with it here.

8. See, for example, the essays in David Howes, ed., *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses* (Toronto, 1991).

tainty. For example, the psychologists Michael Argyle and Mark Cook have recently concluded that "the use of the gaze in human social behavior does not vary much between cultures: it is a cultural universal."[9] But the implications of the work of another psychologist, James Gibson, suggests otherwise. Gibson contrasts two basic visual practices, which produce what he calls "the visual world" and the "visual field."[10] In the former, sight is ecologically intertwined with the other senses to generate the experience of "depth shapes," whereas in the latter, sight is detached by fixating the eyes to produce "projected shapes" instead. A plate, for example, will be experienced as round in the visual world, but as an ellipse in the visual field, where the rules of perspectival representation prevail. The implication of Gibson's argument is that vision is normally crossed with the other senses, but it can be artificially separated out. Thus, cultures might be differentiated according to how radically they distinguish between the visual field and the visual world.

But whether we identify the latter with "natural" vision is not self-evident. In a series of essays, the philosopher Marx Wartofsky has argued for a radically culturalist reading of all visual experience, including Gibson's two dominant modes.[11] Alternately talking about "visual postures," "visual scenarios," "styles of seeing," or "cultural optics," he concludes that

9. Michael Argyle and Mark Cook, *Gaze and Mutual Gaze* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 169. It should be noted that they use the term "gaze" in a general sense to mean any kind of visual interaction. Unlike some of the authors cited later, they do not contrast it with the less fixating glance.

10. James J. Gibson, *The Perception of the Visual World* (Boston, 1950); *Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston, 1966); *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston, 1979). For a recent defense of Gibson, see John Hell, *Perception and Cognition* (Berkeley, 1983).

11. Marx W. Wartofsky, "Pictures, Representations and the Understanding," in *Logic and Art: Essays in Honor of Nelson Goodman,* ed. R. Rudner and I. Scheffler (Indianapolis, 1972); "Perception, Representation and the Forms of Action: Towards an Historical Epistemology," in his *Models: Representation and the Scientific Understanding* (Boston, 1979); "Picturing and Representing," in *Perception and Pictorial Representation*, ed. Calvin F. Nodine and Dennis F. Fisher (New York, 1979); "Visual Scenarios: The Role of Representation in Visual Perception," in *The Perception of Pictures*, ed. M. Hagen, vol. 2 (New York, 1980); "Cameras Can't See: Representation, Photography and Human Vision," *Afterimage*, 7, 9 (1980), pp. 8–9; "Sight, Symbol and Society: Toward a History of Visual Perception," *Philosophic Exchange*, 3 (1981), pp. 23–38; "The Paradox of Painting: Pictorial Representation and the Dimensionality of Visual Space," *Social Research*, 51, 4 (Winter, 1984), pp. 863–883. For a similar plea for a culturalist position, see Robert D. Romanyshyn, "The Despotic Eye: An Illustration of Metabletic Phenomenology and Its Implications," in *The Changing Reality of Modern Man*, ed. I. Dreyer Kruger (Cape Town, 1984); and *Technology as Symptom and Dream* (London, 1989).

"human vision is itself an artifact, produced by other artifacts, namely pictures."[12] *All* perception, he contends, is the result of historical changes in representation. Wartofsky thus presents an intentionalist account of visuality, which verges on making it a product of collective human will.

Judging from the current state of scientific research on sight, which helps in conceptualizing the "natural" capacities and limitations of the eye, Wartofsky's hostility to any physiological explanation of human visual experience may, however, be excessive.[13] Certain fairly fundamental characteristics seem to exist, which no amount of cultural mediation can radically alter. As a diurnal animal standing on its hind legs, the early human being developed its sensorium in such a way as to give sight an ability to differentiate and assimilate most external stimuli in a way superior to the other four senses.[14] Smell, which is so important for animals on

12. Wartofsky, "Picturing and Representing," p. 314.

13. For helpful recent summaries of the status of scientific knowledge about vision, see M. H. Pirenne, *Vision and the Eye* (London, 1967); Robert Rivlin and Karen Gravelle, *Deciphering the Senses: The Expanding World of Human Perception* (New York, 1984); Anthony Smith, *The Body* (London, 1985); John P. Frisby, *Seeing: Illusion, Brain, and Mind* (Oxford, 1980); Steven Pinker, ed., *Visual Cognition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985); Walter J. Freeman, "The Physiology of Perception," *Scientific American* 264, 2 (February, 1991). Cognitive faculty psychology influenced by Noam Chomsky has also attempted to establish a modular concept of the mind in which visual perception transcends cultural variations. See, for example, Jerry A. Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind: An Essay on Faculty Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983).

14. The anthropologist Edward T. Hall has conjectured that even before hominids stood on their hind legs, vision was important: "Originally a ground-dwelling animal, man's ancestor was forced by interspecies competition and changes in the environment to desert the ground and take to the trees. Arboreal life calls for keen vision and decreases dependence on smell, which is crucial for terrestrial organisms. Thus

all fours, was reduced in importance, a fateful transformation that Freud was to conjecture was the very foundation of human civilization.[15] Vision was the last of the human senses to develop fully, its very complexity always proving a difficult case for incremental theories of evolution. It also remains the last of the senses to develop in the fetus, only in fact gaining its true importance for the survival of the neonate some time after birth.[16] The infant, it is sometimes argued, experiences a synesthetic confusion of the senses without vision fully differentiated from the rest. Smell and touch are apparently more functionally vital than sight at this very early stage of development.

With the maturation of the child, however, the superior capacity of the eyes to process certain kinds of data from without is soon established. Having some eighteen times more nerve endings than the cochlear nerve of the ear, its nearest competitor, the optic nerve with its 800,000 fibers is able to transfer an astonishing amount of information to the brain, and at a rate of assimilation far greater than that of any other sense organ. In each eye, over 120 million rods take in information on some five hundred levels of lightness and darkness, while more than seven million cones allow us to distinguish among more than one million combinations of color. The eye is also able to accomplish its tasks at a far greater remove than any other sense, hearing and smell being only a distant second and third.[17]

Despite the frequent characterization of vision as atemporal and static, the eye can only do its job by being in almost constant motion. Either it

man's sense of smell ceased to develop and his powers of sight were greatly enhanced." See Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (Garden City, N.Y., 1982), p. 39.

15. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1961), pp. 46–47.

16. Rivlin and Gravelle, p. 79. It might be noted that they posit a much wider sensorium than the generally accepted five senses. Based on experiments with a variety of animals, science has noted some seventeen different ways in which organisms can respond to the environment. Some of these may have a residual role in human behavior, which possibly accounts for the existence of so-called extrasensory perception. Still, they acknowledge that humans tend to rely on sight more than any other sense.

rapidly jumps from one briefly fixated point to another through what are known as saccadic movements (named after the French for jerk, *saccade*, by Émile Javal, who discovered them in 1878)[18] or it follows a moving object across a visual field. Its so-called vestibulo-ocular reflex makes it turn in the opposite direction of a rapid head movement to retain a continuity of image and its "vergence system" constantly fuses short and long-range focus into one coherent visual experience.[19] Even during sleep, as scientists only learned in the 1960s, rapid eye movement is the norm. Although it is, of course, possible to fix the gaze, we cannot really freeze the movement of the eye for very long without incurring intolerable strain.

Although the optical mechanism of vision has been well understood since the time of Kepler,[20] who established the laws of refraction governing the transmission of light rays through the cornea, viscous humors, and lenses of the eyeball onto the retinal wall at its rear, the precise manner of its translation into meaningful images in the mind remains somewhat clouded. The image received is reversed and inverted, but the physiological cum psychological processes which "read" it correctly are still incompletely known. The binocular or stereoscopic integration of data from the two eyes into one image with apparent three-dimensional depth is also

17. According to Hall, "Up to twenty feet the ear is very efficient. At about one hundred feet, one-way vocal communication is possible, at a somewhat slower rate than at conversational distances, while a two-way conversation is very considerably altered. Beyond this distance, the auditory cues with which man works begin to break down rapidly. The unaided eye, on the other hand, sweeps up an extraordinary amount of information within a hundred-yard radius and is still quite efficient for human interaction at a mile" (*The Hidden Dimension*, p. 43).

18. Émile Javal, *Annales d'oculistique* (Paris, 1878).

19. For a discussion of these systems, see Argyle and Cook, pp. 16–17. See also Claude Gandelman, "The 'Scanning' of Pictures," *Communication and Cognition*, 19, 1 (1986), pp. 3–24.

20. For an excellent history of optics up through Kepler, see David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (Chicago, 1976). See also the various histories of Vasco Ronchi, most notably *Optics: The Science of Vision*, trans. Edward Rosen (New York, 1957), and *The Nature of Light: An Historical Survey*, trans. V. Barocas (London, 1975).

not yet fully understood. Indeed, with all the advances science has made in explaining human vision, its complexities are such that many questions remain unanswered. Significantly, attempts to duplicate it through computer simulation have met so far with only very modest success.[21]

If the eye's powers are appreciated by science, so too are its limitations. Human vision can see light waves that are only a fraction of the total spectrum—in fact, less than 1 percent with such phenomena as ultraviolet light, visible to other species, excluded.[22] In addition, the human eye has a blind spot where the optic nerve connects with the retina. Normally ignored because the vision of the other eye compensates for it, the blind spot's existence nonetheless suggests a metaphoric "hole" in vision, which, as we will have ample occasion to witness, critics of ocularcentrism gleefully exploit. Human vision is also limited by its capacity to focus on objects only a certain distance from the eye, a distance that normally increases with age. Thus the eye's superiority at sensing objects from afar is balanced by its inferiority at seeing those very close. Finally, we are often fooled by visual experience that turns out to be illusory, an inclination generated perhaps by our overwhelming, habitual belief in its apparent reliability. Here the compensating sense is usually touch, as we seek confirmation through direct physical contact.

One final aspect of the contemporary natural scientific understanding of vision merits comment. Unlike the other senses of smell, touch, or taste, there seems to be a close, if complicated, relationship between sight and language, both of which come into their own at approximately the same moment of maturation. As Robert Rivlin and Karen Gravelle note, "The ability to visualize something internally is closely linked with the ability to describe it verbally. Verbal and written descriptions create highly specific mental images. . . . The link between vision, visual memory, and verbalization can be quite startling."[23] There is therefore something revealing in the ambiguities surrounding the word "image," which can signify graphic, optical, perceptual, mental, or verbal phenomena.[24]

The implications of this final point are very significant for the problem noted earlier: the permeability of the boundary between the "natural" and the "cultural" component in what we call vision. Although perception is intimately tied up with language as a generic phenomenon, different peoples of course speak different tongues. As a result, the universality of visual experience cannot be automatically assumed, if that experience is in part mediated linguistically. Natural science, therefore, itself suggests the possibility of cultural variables, at least to some degree. It implies, in other words, the inevitable entanglement of vision and what has been called "visuality"—the distinct historical manifestations of visual experience in all its possible modes.[25] Observation, to put it another way, means observing the tacit cultural rules of different scopic regimes.

The cultural variability of ocular experience will be even more evident if we consider it, as it were, from a different perspective. The eye, it has long been recognized, is more than the passive receptor of light and color. It is also the most expressive of the sense organs, with the only competitor being touch. Although the ancient theory of light rays emanating from the eye, the theory called extramission, has long since been discredited,[26]

21. See William J. Broad, "Computer Quest to Match Human Vision Stymied," *International Herald Tribune* (October 4, 1984), p. 7.

22. Rivlin and Gravelle, p. 53.

23. Ibid., pp. 88–89. For a discussion of the complex interaction between vocal-auditory and gestural-visual channels of communication, see Argyle and Cook, p. 124.

24. For an account of its various meanings, see W. J. T. Mitchell, "What Is an Image?" in *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago, 1986). For a more restrictive notion of the term which attacks its literary use, see P. N. Furbank, *Reflections on the Word 'Image'* (London, 1970).

25. For a discussion of the difference, see Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle, 1988), especially the editor's preface.

26. Perhaps the belief in rays coming from the eye was due to the phenomenon of light shining off the eyeball through reflection, which is especially evident in certain animals. Descartes, as late as *La Dioptrique*, credited the cat with extramission for this reason. In 1704, however, an experiment showed that if a cat is immersed in water, the lack of corneal refraction prevents the eye from shining. See Smith, *The Body*, p. 380.

it expressed a symbolic truth. For the eye—broadly understood as including the complex of muscles, flesh, and even hair around the eyeball—can clearly project, signal, and emit emotions with remarkable power. Common phrases such as "a piercing or penetrating gaze," "melting eyes," "a come-hither look," or "casting a cold eye" all capture this ability with striking vividness. Aided by its capacity to overflow with the tears necessary to bathe it with constant moisture, a capacity triggered by a multitude of different stimuli, some physical, some emotional (the latter found only in humans), the eye is not only, as the familiar clichés would have it, a "window on the world," but also a "mirror of the soul."[27] Even the dilation of the pupil can unintentionally betray an inner state, subtly conveying interest or aversion to the beholder.

There is, moreover, a learned ability to use the eyes to express something deliberately, a skill more sharply honed than in the case of the other senses. Ranging from the casual glance to the fixed glare, the eye can obey the conscious will of the viewer in a way denied the other more passive senses, once again the only competitor being touch with its ability to strangle as well as caress. The phenomenon of the evil eye, mentioned above, is only one manifestation of this potential for sending powerful messages. As a result, vision is often called "the censor of the senses . . . an arbiter of behavior, an inhibitor or stimulus thereto,"[28] unlike the more accepting touch. Significantly, of all the animals, only man and the primates have the ability to use the gaze to send affiliative as well as threatening signals. Here scientists have conjectured that this ability may be a residue of our visually charged infant feeding position with the maternal look of love the key to later behavior.[29]

27. For a discussion of the importance of crying as an ocular experience, see David Michael Levin, *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (New York, 1988), chap. 2.

28. Ashley Montagu, *Touching: The Significance of the Human Skin*, 3d ed. (New York, 1986), p. 269.

29. Argyle and Cook, p. 26. They suggest that because Japanese mothers tend to carry their infants on their back, their culture is less dependent on the mutual gaze. As for the contention that only humans and primates send affiliative signals, which is also theirs, it might be thought that dogs do the same, at least in their interaction with humans. But do they send each other such messages too?

Messages are only such, of course, if they are received, and one of the most extraordinary aspects of vision, most broadly conceived, is the experience of being the object of the look. Here the range of possibilities is exceptionally wide, extending from the paranoid's fantasy of being under constant hostile surveillance to the exhibitionist's narcissistic thrill at being the cynosure of all eyes. There can also be few human interactions as subtle as the dialectic of the mutual gaze, ranging from the contest for domination to the lovers' complementary adoration. Even *not* being the object of the look conveys a powerful message under certain circumstances, as any underling who has become an "invisible man" will quickly attest.

Terms such as paranoia, narcissism, and exhibitionism suggest how powerfully visual experience, both directed and received, can be tied to our psychological processes. In ways we will explore later, vision has been frequently linked by psychologists to the "normal" emotions of desire, curiosity, hostility, and fear. The remarkable ability of images originally construed as mimetic representations or aesthetic ornaments to be transformed into totemic objects of worship in their own right also bespeaks vision's power to evoke hypnotic fascination.[30] And scopophilic and scopophobic inclinations have also been widely acknowledged as fundamental aspects of the human psyche.[31]

With all of these dimensions to the phenomenon we call vision—and others can doubtless be added—it is no surprise that our ordinary language, indeed our culture as a whole, is deeply marked by its importance. An excellent example of its power can be discerned in no less central a human phenomenon than religion.[32] From the primitive importance of

30. The word *fascination*, it might be noted, has itself an origin in the Latin for casting a spell, usually by visual means.

31. For a recent account of their implications, see David W. Allen, *The Fear of Looking: On Scopophilic-Exhibitional Conflicts* (Charlottesville, Va., 1974).

32. For a recent overview, see David Chidester, *Word and Light: Seeing, Hearing, and Religious Discourse* (Champaign, Ill., 1992). Another obvious area is literature,

the sacred fire[33] to the frequency of sun-worship in more developed religions—such as the Chaldean and Egyptian—and the sophisticated metaphysics of light in the most advanced theologies,[34] the ocular presence in a wide variety of religious practices has been striking. Some faiths, like Manichaean Gnosticism, have fashioned themselves "religions of light"; others, like the often polytheistic Greek religion, assigned a special role to sun gods like Apollo. Unearthly, astral light surrounding the godhead, the divine illumination sought by the mystic, the omniscience of a god always watching his flock, the symbolic primacy of the candle's flame—all of these have found their way into countless religious systems. So too has the remarkable power attributed to mirrors, which so-called scryers or *specularii* have claimed a special gift to read for signs of the divine. At times the insubstantiality of the mirror's image has been taken as a token of the purity of the dematerialized soul. At others, the "spotless mirror" has been analogized to the immaculate nature of the Virgin Mary.[35]

No less symptomatic of the power of the optical in religion is the tendency of the visionary tradition to posit a higher sight of the seer, who is able to discern a truth denied to normal vision. Here the so-called third eye of the soul is invoked to compensate for the imperfections of the two physical eyes. Often physical blindness is given sacred significance, even if at times as a punishment for transgressions against the gods.[36] What

where visual imagery abounds. There is an inexhaustible commentary on "the eye in the text."

33. The classic study of its importance is by Numa-Denys Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study of Religion, Laws and Institutions of Greece and Rome*, trans. Willard Small (Boston, 1873).

34. For a survey of religions of light, see Gustav Mensching, "Die Lichtsymbolik in der Religionsgeschichte," *Studium Generale*, 10 (1957), pp. 422–432.

35. For accounts of the religious importance of mirrors, see Benjamin Goldberg, *The Mirror and Man* (Charlottesville, Va., 1985); and Herbert Grabes, *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-Imagery in Titles and Texts of the Middle Ages and the English Renaissance*, trans. Gordon Collier (Cambridge, 1982).

36. For a discussion of the religious implications of blindness, see William R. Paulsen, *Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France* (Princeton, 1987), Introduction.

Thomas Carlyle once called "spiritual optics"[37] has, of course, continued to have a powerful secular effect well after its original religious sources lost much of their legitimacy.

But as might be expected of so deeply affecting a phenomenon, the ocular presence in religion has also aroused a hostile reaction. Its privileged role has been challenged, especially when the gap between spiritual and mundane optics has been perceived as unbridgeable. In fact, suspicion of the illusory potential of images has often led to full-fledged iconophobia.[38] Monotheistic religions, beginning with Judaism, have been deeply wary of the threat of pagan idolatry. The fictional character of artificial images, which can only be false simulators of the "truth," has occasioned distrust among more puritanical critics of representation. St. Paul's celebrated warning against the *speculum obscurum*, the glass (or mirror) through which we see only darkly, vividly expressed this caution about terrestrial sight. Religious distrust was also aroused by the capacity of vision to inspire what Augustine condemned as *concupiscentia ocularum*, ocular desire, which diverts our minds from more spiritual concerns.[39] These and like suspicions have at times come to dominate religious movements and dictate long-standing religious taboos. Moses's struggle with Aaron over the Golden Calf, the Islamic rejection of figural representation, the iconoclastic controversy of the eighth-century Byzantine church, the Cistercian monasticism of St. Bernard, the English Lollards, and finally the Protestant Reformation all express the antiocular subcurrent of religious thought. In fact, this hostility remains alive today in the work of such theologians as Jacques Ellul, whose *Humiliation of the Word*, written in 1981, reads like a summa of every imaginable religious complaint against the domination of sight.[40]

37. Thomas Carlyle, "Spiritual Optics," in *Thomas Carlyle, 1795–1835*, ed. James Anthony Froude, 2 vols. (New York, 1882), 2: 7–12.

38. For a survey of its various manifestations, see Kenneth Clark, "Iconophobia," in *Moments of Vision and Other Essays* (New York, 1981). See also Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York, 1992).

39. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, chap. 35.

40. Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1985).

⊙

Ellul's animus against vision cannot, however, be understood solely in the context of the time-honored tradition of religious iconophobia, for it draws as well on a much wider antivisual discourse that extends beyond the boundaries of religious thought. That discourse, I hope to demonstrate, is a pervasive but generally ignored phenomenon of twentieth-century Western thought. Although by no means confined to one locale, it is most prevalent and multifarious in a country where it may seem, for reasons we will examine shortly, highly improbable. That country is France. It will be the main purpose of this study to demonstrate and explore what at first glance may seem a surprising proposition: a great deal of recent French thought in a wide variety of fields is in one way or another imbued with a profound suspicion of vision and its hegemonic role in the modern era.[41]

To establish this argument, I will begin with a general consideration of the history of Western attitudes toward sight in its various guises. After focusing more precisely on the honored place of the visual in French culture since the time of Louis XIV and Descartes, I will turn to the indications of its crisis in the late nineteenth century by examining changes in the visual arts, literature, and philosophy, most notably the work of Henri Bergson. I will then explore more explicit manifestations of hostility to visual primacy in the work of artists and critics like Georges Bataille and André Breton, philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Emmanuel Levinas, social theorists like Michael Foucault, Louis Althusser, and Guy Debord, psychoanalysts like Jacques Lacan and Luce Irigaray, cultural critics like Roland Barthes and Christian Metz, and poststructuralist theorists like Jacques Derrida and Jean-François

41. Other examples of a similar attitude will no doubt occur to readers familiar with different national traditions: for example, American pragmatism with its distrust of spectatorial epistemology or German hermeneutics with its general privileging of the ear over the eye. It would also be possible to pursue the theme in the work of individual thinkers outside of the orbit of French thought, such as Wittgenstein with his subtle ruminations on the distinction between "seeing" and "seeing-as."

Lyotard. In so doing, I hope to clarify the implications of the denigration of vision for the current debate over modernity and postmodernity.

⊙

Before beginning so ambitious an undertaking, a few words of methodological explanation are in order. The focus of this study is on a discourse rather than on a visual culture in its entirety. It would, in fact, be very hazardous to characterize French culture as a whole as hostile to the visual. Paris, "the City of Lights," remains for many the most dazzling and brilliant urban setting ever devised by our species. The fascination of the French with such visually dominated phenomena as fashion, cinema, or public ceremonial remains unabated. And as anyone who has spent the month of August on the Côte d'Azur can easily testify, they are scarcely less fascinated than ancient solar cultists in "worshiping the sun."[42] Indeed, even their intellectuals tend to be obsessed with visual phenomena, as the remarkable preoccupation of so many of them with painting, photography, film, and architecture demonstrates.

And yet, for many that obsession has turned in a negative direction, as an essentially ocularphobic discourse has seeped into the pores of French intellectual life. By choosing to call the complex of antivisual attitudes a discourse, I am fully aware that I am invoking one of the most loosely used terms of our time. It has been employed in a host of different contexts, from the communicative rationalism of a Jürgen Habermas to the archaeology of knowledge of a Foucault; from the computerized Althusserianism of a Michel Pêcheux to the sociolinguistics of a Malcolm Coulthard; from the textual analysis of a Zelig Harris to the ethnomethodology of a Harvey Sacks.[43]

42. See John Weightman, "The Solar Revolution: Reflections on a Theme in French Literature," *Encounter*, 35, 6 (December, 1970), pp. 9–18, for an account of sun worship and its literary manifestations, which he dates from André Gide.

43. Jürgen Habermas, "Wahrheitstheorien," in *Wirklichkeit und Reflexion: Walther Schulz zum 60. Geburtstag* (Pfullingen, 1973), pp. 211–265; Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan (London, 1972), in which the term