

PDF - THE VICTORIAN EYE: A POLITICAL HISTORY OF LIGHT AND VISION IN BRITAIN, 1800–1910 BY CHRIS OTTER - researchcub.info

Chris Otter intends his book *The Victorian Eye* to be a political history of visual culture in nineteenth-century Britain. But he is little interested in politics or even political economy. It would be more accurate to say that that he has produced (drawing on a word he uses but does not develop) a politico-cultural history of the multitude of ways in which the material culture of light and vision was shaped by the political ideology of British liberalism. By using liberalism as his framework, Otter makes a significant contribution to our understanding of visual culture in nineteenth-century Britain. In particular he reconstructs a range of visual practices based on the liberal subjectivity that permeated the culture and shows how these helped to reshape the built environment. Otter's self-governed liberal subjects (usually upper or middle-class individuals) were 'expected to possess many different visual capacities: attention, observation, recognition, introspection, discernment, literacy' (p.46). These capacities gave them the ability to observe themselves as well as others objectively in order to read character and to move autonomously about the city. Nonetheless, because the built environment of the industrial city 'was perceived as blocked, gloomy, filthy, and demoralizing' it became for his liberal subjects a 'political visual problem' (p.53). Their solutions to this problem emerged through what Otter calls 'numberless little acts of municipal engineering' (p.61) that reconfigured the built environment. Otter begins his book by tracing the development of ophthalmological science and the emergence of new practices designed to produce better visual habits, including efforts to protect against the myopia brought on by the visual rigours of modern civilization and liberal subjectivity. He then discusses how these visual practices were embodied in oligoptic spaces in which mutual oversight between liberal subjects could take place while individuals were also enabled to withdraw from view. Such spaces were produced by a range of municipal engineering and architectural projects that included street widening and soundproofing, smoke abatement and the growing use of glass in buildings. Especially important, according to Otter, who devotes a chapter to the subject, was the creation of new regimes of inspection. He does a terrific job of detailing the many forms of inspection undertaken by municipal governments, paying special attention to new portable tools used by inspectors as well as the ways that street signs, house numbers and traffic lights enabled inspection and made it more efficient. These new inspection regimes were also aided by the creation of new spaces designed to enable inspection while also keeping certain things, such as death and animals suffering, out of public view. Among these new spaces were the modern hospital, the abattoir and the access pipe for technological systems.

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