The Emergence of Pre-Cinema: Print Culture and the Optical Toy of the Literary Imagination

The Emergence of Pre-Cinema opens with a Benjamin citation quoted from Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* (1990), as well as a description of the Belgian artist Laurent Montaron's video installation for the 2013 Venice Biennale, 'that included close-ups of the functioning apparatus of the magic lantern, as a reflection on consciousness, temporality, and how technology has mediated the experience of both' (p. 1). This introductory gesture – as well as the title – sets the reader up for a critical work which, like Crary's seminal text, considers the way that technologies of vision have shaped literary and art historical perspectives.

But, if this focus is what the first few lines anticipate, *The Emergence of Pre-Cinema* ultimately offers something which is somewhat broader. It does not go into great detail on the historiography of particular technologies of perception, but rather with literary perspective itself as a kind of 'optical toy' (p. 3), or mode of seeing. It gives a nod towards the work of Max Milner, Werner Nekes, and Jonathan Crary, but does not take up any of these texts' groundings in a particular material history, skipping instead through references to painting, landscape architecture, photography, and (in spite its title's insistence) cinema. Historically, it centres on the nineteenth century, but frames the period both prospectively and retrospectively, 'offer[ing] a Janus-like perspective on nineteenth-century visuality' (p. 2). And print culture, which here is literal shorthand for non-manuscript culture, rather than an extended exploration of print's circulation or reception, likewise does not present a longer-term resting place.

What Gabriele's text considers, then, is how 'pre-cinematic spectacles, among them the 'optical toys' of periodicals and novel writing' (p. 5) visualize Foucault's modern episteme, and modernity more generally. As such, the analysis of *The Emergence of Pre-Cinema* centres on certain key nodes, particularly textual self-reflexivity, and the interplay between fragmentation and unity. At its centre is Wordsworth's *Prelude,* Schlegel's *Athenaeum,* and Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, but by beginning with a chapter on Dante,

Donne, and Shakespeare's poetry, and interspersing references to post-nineteenth century modernity throughout, it promises a broader genealogy. Or, in Gabriele's words, 'The narrative arc of the book identifies key elements in the long a dispersed history of fragmentation and self-reflexivity that will be championed only in twentieth-century after having been obfuscated by a dominant discourse of order and unity in nineteenth-century, which is the same discursive force that guided inventors and scientists studying optics to move toward the 'alchemical synths' of the moving image, no matter how multidirectional and multisensory the pre-cinematic aesthetic was' (p. 10).

This argument leaves itself open to two central criticisms. The first is methodological: in sketching a claim associating the fragment's 'dominant discourse' with the twentieth century, Gabriele does not account for the extended body of scholarship that, like him, has placed this line much earlier. In fact, the concept of the romantic fragment, while seeming to underlay the book's main premise, is not a subject of explicit discussion. Major critical work in this area, such as Marjorie Levinson's *The Romantic Fragment Poem* (1986), or Naomi Schor's *Reading in Detail* (1987) is not cited or discussed, though investigations such as these lay the much earlier groundwork for thinking about the interplay between the part and the whole in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In fact, the scholarly discussion overlooks even much more recent work, such as Arthur Bahr's *Fragments and Assemblages* (2013), which shifts this investigation to the medieval period that is Gabriele's starting point. The omission of this conversation from the text's scaffolding makes for an argument that seems disconnected from its own literary historical background.

The second possible criticism offers some explanation for these omissions. In the introduction, Gabriele explains the text's expansive temporal and geographical approach as a reliance 'on methodological premises that transcend classical periodizations and national boundaries in the study of literature' (p. 2). While this sets the work in line with comparative and expansive concepts, such as literary deep time, it also arguably causes some of the text's more obvious omissions. Like the fast and loose approach to visual, material, and print culture, the breadth of the textual canon can problematize entering into scholarly conversations in any sustained depth, or staking very precise claims. Thus, the expansive scope tends toward allusiveness rather than a firm critical grounding, and discussions that would seem to be key to the text's claims, such as the literary and cultural history of the fragment, are sidelined. In this sense, the ambition of the work in both scope and interdisciplinarity leads to some significant, but in this context almost inevitable, blind spots.

If the study's main weakness, then, is a dispersive critical framework that does not adequately serve to tie together its wide-ranging parts, it should be noted that the book's individual chapters can at times stand sufficiently on their own. This is

particularly true of the chapters that form the critical core of the text, those centering on Ann Radcliffe and William Wordsworth. 'A Map to the Panorama: Intellectualized Vision and the Unrestrained Power of Shifting Forms, in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*,' the book's fourth chapter, uses the lens of particular contemporary optical perspectives – including the sublime, the picturesque, and the cartographic – to locate the visual descriptions of Radcliffe's text. The picturesque, with its focus on the aesthetic whole and part, offers a clear grounding for Gabriele's focus on textual fragmentation and his statement that 'The literary imagination … offers a valuable example to 'how people looked' at the time' (p. 102), could stand in for the goals of the study as a whole. Similarly, chapter five, 'British Flanerie, ca. 1805: William Wordsworth as Man with a Movie Camera and the Aesthetic Polarities of the Emerging Modernity' finds in Wordsworth's representation of London in *The Prelude* an anticipation of early experimental film techniques. Or, as the author explains, 'the objectified 'I-eye' of the poet's narrative – and its editing technique – not only incorporates suggestions from an empirical attention to the processes of vision, [but also] inaugurates a new aesthetic of urban modernism that informed a distinctive genre of early cinema, that is 'a day in the life of a big city'' (p. 172). Though this parallel is at odds with the book's generally pre-cinematic focus, it sets itself apart from earlier studies of Wordsworth's optics that have tended to draw out the influence of a single contemporary visual technology.

Even these strongest sections of the work, though, are often overwritten and underedited. The text is marred with some typographical errors, but much more substantively distracting is the digressive prose, which forces the reader to disentangle key sections painstakingly. The subject matter is complex, but the difficulty with the writing lies more typically in a lack of clear focus and an excess of jargon. This is academic prose at its most academic which is a shame given the potentially broad interdisciplinary appeal of the subject matter.

The Emergence of Pre-Cinema, then, will primarily be of interest to academic specialists within literary and visual culture, who might turn to the text for a foundation in the relation between different literary techniques and optical devices. With its broad overview of scholarship, the study can also provide a birds-eye view of recent work in romantic and visual studies. What it lacks in sharp focus, in other words, might serve as an advantage for the cause of its bibliographic breadth.

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