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## Review of Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*.

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**Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1999. 397 pp. ISBN 0262032651.**

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In his much-acclaimed first book, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1990), Jonathan Crary, Associate Professor of Art History at Columbia University, argues that in the course of the first half of the nineteenth century in Europe the prevailing philosophical model of human visual perception based on the optical mechanism of the camera obscura--an enclosed, darkened chamber outfitted with a lens to focus an instant image of the exterior world onto an interior screen--came to be replaced by a new physiological model of an embodied, light-sensitive eye subject to the changing pulsations of exterior as well as interior (or entoptical) retinal stimulation. From *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of 1690 by John Locke to Hermann von Helmholtz's *Treatise on Physiological Optics* of 1856-66 and Sigmund Freud's unpublished "Project for a Scientific Psychology" of 1895, we thus are led to traverse an epistemological terrain in tremendous upheaval in which the empiricist representation of a stable spatial dualism of subject and object is transformed into an unstable temporal scenario of subject and object in continuous physical and psychological interaction. It is the unfolding of this reciprocal scenario in the second half of the nineteenth century that provides the compelling narrative of Crary's new sequel, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*.

Crary takes his title in part from Freud's 1912 paper on psychoanalytic technique in which the analyst is advised to attend to the analysand with *gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit* or an "evenly suspended attention" (367). Such a modality of attention seeks to overcome the rigid dualism of an all-knowing physician and an unknowing patient in order to allow a novelty of knowledge to be produced through an unscripted and unpredictable interaction between the two. Rather than try to force a fragile human faculty of attentiveness into an impossibly unwavering fixity of focus, Freud instead authorizes the analyst to be open without prejudgment to the multisensorial flow of the temporal event. In contrast to this suspension of the analyst within the flow of time, Freud's philosophical predecessor Arthur Schopenhauer had earlier advocated "a purified perception that would be a suspension from time and the body's economy," and it is this poignant but unattainable emancipation from the inexorable march of time that Crary names the "mirage of modernism" that he seeks to demystify in his new book (57). "It is a dream that begins . . . with Schopenhauer--the dream of an attention absolved of the play of difference, of flux--of a perception that becomes a suspension of will [Schopenhauer's word for the ineluctable exigencies of Life], a submission to the frozen phantasmic logic of unification" (211). Unification, that shibboleth of modernism, is Crary's word for Death.

Although Crary learnedly calls upon the post-Kantian philosophical quest for the suspended timelessness, indeed eternity, that would be the absolute transcendence of the empirical vicissitudes of the human body subjected to the inhuman determinations of space and time, the signature-novelty of his discourse is its reliance on the experimental literature of physiology and psychology to sustain his argument concerning the empirical basis of "a suspended temporality, a hovering out of time" (10). Hypnosis, a phenomenon of the greatest interest to late nineteenth-century investigators such as Charcot, Freud, and William James, is thus presented as exemplary

in its intrinsic duality "involving an intensification of focal concentration with a relative suspension of peripheral awareness" (66). The result of hypnosis will be "a suspension of critical judgment," in the words of the *Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience* of 1991 which Crary characteristically cites (68), but Crary's aim is to argue that this same biological coimplication of opposed mental states historically characterizes the fluctuating attention and distraction of nineteenth-century life under capitalism just as it increasingly characterizes twenty-first century life in the face of the alternately enslaving and emancipating pixellations of our ubiquitous cybernetic screens.

After a first chapter of some sixty pages in which Crary considers "Modernity and the Problem of Attention," he turns to three lengthy historical exemplifications of the nineteenth-century dialectic of a powerfully normative and focalized attention and an irresistibly countervailing and defocalized distraction in the art of Edouard Manet ("Unbinding Vision"), Georges Seurat ("Illuminations of Disenchantment"), and Paul Cézanne ("Reinventing Synthesis"). Various named the "irreducibly *mixed* modalities" of perception (3), "a deeply equivocal attentiveness and distraction" (103), "a ceaseless play of disclosure and concealment" (150), "an inseparable mix of an abstract mathematically constructed space *and* a [subjectively determined] physiological perception" (218), "the rhythmic coexistence of radically heterogeneous and temporally dispersed elements" (297), "the dynamic reciprocity of perceptual fixation and disintegration" (332), "a contradictory form of synthetic unity in which rupture is also part of an unbroken flow of time, in which disjunction and continuity must be thought together" (344-45), all of Crary's insistently dialectical locutions are so many rhetorical figures for "the inevitable intertwining of subject and object" (284). "Hovering between a functional operation of vision and the atemporal undulations of reverie" (88; Manet's *The Balcony*, 1868), hovering "enigmatically between the evocation, the promise of a chromatic immediacy and the relentless unmasking of the absence and vacancy of appearance within a reified, quantifiable world" (151; Seurat's *Sideshow*, 1887-88), "hovering at a threshold where revelation is inseparable from the onset of its dissolution" (359; Cézanne's *Pines and Rocks*, c. 1900), these and other paintings by the same artists are seen to hover "ambiguously between two scopic regimes . . . : between the metric and homogeneous tableau loosely synonymous with classical space, and a decentered and destabilized perceptual regime with its mobile and embodied observer" (190). And if paintings, not unlike the Holy Ghost, may be said to hover in the betweenness of the phenomenal and noumenal worlds of science and religion, so too the worshipper-beholder *manqué* of capitalist commodification, "hovering between submission to its empirical operation and anticipation of a luminous fusion of all that is unreconciled in it" (280).

We can discern in his quasi-religious language that Crary's critique of capitalism and his hope for social transformation is sustained by the messianic modernist Marxisms of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and their principal American explicator Fredric Jameson. According to Jameson's Frankfurt School negative dialectics, the modernist art that is Crary's concern is precisely defined in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) as marking an "absence at the heart of the secular world . . . an object world forever suspended on the brink of meaning, forever disposed to receive the revelation of evil or grace that never comes" (151). As Crary concludes with perhaps a tad more optimism of faith,

In the works I've examined by Manet, Seurat, and Cézanne, a sustained attentiveness was never fully separate from a complex social and psychic machinery of sublimation; an absorbed perception, for each of them, was the disavowal, the evasion of a vision that laid bare an injured horizon of unfulfilled yearnings. Yet in its suspension, it also produced the conditions in which the apparent necessity and self-sufficiency of the present could be dissolved, allowing the anticipation of an ineffable future and also the redemption of the shimmering and derelict objects of memory. (362)

Alternatively, "presentness is grace," and it is these final words from Michael Fried's notorious essay, "Art and Objecthood" of 1967 (reprinted in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998]) that comprise the barely unacknowledged intertext for Crary's modernist critique. If not present explicitly in this quotation, Fried is otherwise far from absent in Crary's text. Of Manet's *In the Conservatory* (1879), Crary's principal exhibit for the painter's dialectical suspension of the absence and presence in representation, Crary notes that Fried in *Manet's Modernism or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) both affirms the almost excessive finish of the painting in many of its details even as he affirms at the same time the strikingly unfinished quality of other parts of the painting (90). Also borrowed from Fried is the cardinal notion of the dialectic of attention and distraction, but whereas Fried in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California, 1980) tends to see paintings by different artists as either productive of an intense or a merely casual mode of spectatorial attentiveness, Crary tends to position this contrast as an internal fluctuation within the paintings he examines by Manet, Seurat, and Cézanne. Thus for Crary, Fried's account of eighteenth-century art provides only one half of the phenomenological transaction of the new, modern spectator with the new, modernist work of art in France one hundred years later: "A painting, it was claimed, had first to attract (*attirer, appeller*) and then to arrest (*arrêter*) and finally to enthrall (*attacher*) the beholder . . . as if spellbound and unable to move" (241 n. 212).

Adapted from a phrase in a letter of Freud describing his transient absorption in a communal experience of visual perception followed by his lonely alienation from the anonymous crowd at an outdoor cinematographic performance in 1907, "Spellbound in Rome" is the title of Crary's epilogue, and it is his means--or rather mine--of moving from the spellbound aesthetics of a Diderotian, Schopenhauerian, or Friedian modernism of a decorporealized and suspended presentness to a Nietzschean, Mallarméan, or Derridean modernism/postmodernism that would be, in the words of Leo Bersani in *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), "a lesson in the nonpresentness constitutive of human attention and expression" (119 n. 82). It is, of course, a somatic embeddedness of thought and affect that will reintegrate the split Kantian dualism of mind and body in the new materialist dialectics of psychoanalysis. Already in 1850 Freud's experimental predecessor Helmholtz had insisted on the impossibility of an instantaneous presentness of visual perception on account of the deferred neurological time between stimulus and response (310). For Crary, Henri Bergson's modernist effort forty years later to reunify what had been rent asunder in the scientific laboratory was "an imaginary imposition of unity on contents that are irreducibly dissociated" (327). And thus for Crary it is the modernity of the achievement of Manet, Seurat, and Cézanne in the pictorial domain, as it is the modernity of the achievement of Freud in the indissoluble realm of the senses, to have designed "a singular model of attentiveness, one that resists the

notion of selection and surmounts an inhibition of the peripheral" (368). "It is a loss of self that shifts uncertainly between an emancipatory evaporation of interiority and distance and a numbing incorporation into myriad assemblages of work, communication, and consumption" (370).

*Neither* "a seamless regime of separation" under market capitalism *nor* "an ominous collective mobilization" of the totalitarian state, the future utopia whose advent Crary proclaims "will be a patchwork of fluctuating effects in which individuals and groups continually reconstitute themselves" (370). This will be so, Crary believes, because "an embodied subject is both the location of operations of power and the potential for resistance" (3). Only if saying it would be enough to make it so.