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Ford Madox Ford

Vision, Visuality and Writing

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Introduction

At the crossroads of Ford criticism is the Conradian idea that fiction should above all 'make you see'.[1] So it comes as no surprise that this Impressionist motif has already been widely investigated by Fordian scholars. Its biographical and psychological implications have been brought to light,[2] its epistemological intricacies analysed,[3] its relationships to Futurist and Cubist techniques sketched and repeatedly hinted at. On the face of it, it seems no further substantial critical enquiry is needed. Yet, most of the issues which, over the last two decades or so, have been explored and debated in the burgeoning field of visual studies, still lack sustained consideration in relation to Ford. This book aims at filling this void and is consistently informed by recent developments in the domain of art and visual culture discourse. The aim is to analyse the theme of the gaze in relation to Ford's most experimental novels. To this end, after the investigation of how the logic of the gaze is displayed in Ford's art criticism (chapter 1), chapters 2, 3, and 4 are devoted to his main modernist novels *The Good Soldier* (1915), *Parade's End* (1924–1928), the *The Rash Act* (1933) and *Henry for Hugh* (1934). The aim is to explore the uncharted territory of Ford's interest in the scopic field, paying particular attention to the complex logic of the gaze as it emerges in these works. The novelty

1 Ford's theory and literary practice echoes Joseph Conrad's statement: 'My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel — it is above all to make you *see*'; 'Preface' to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*; originally published as 'Author's Note' after the novel's publication in instalments in the *New Review* 17 (Dec. 1897), 628–31.

2 See Max Saunders, '"To make you see": la metafisica della letteratura in Ford Madox Ford', in *Scrittura e sperimentazione in Ford Madox Ford*, eds. Raffaella Baccolini e Vita Fortunati (Firenze: Alinea Editrice, 1994), 59–89.

3 See P. B. Armstrong, 'The Epistemology of the Good Soldier: A Phenomenological Reconsideration', *Criticism* 22: 3 (1980), 230–51 and A. B. Snitow, *Ford Madox Ford and the Voice of Uncertainty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1984).

and modernity of these texts will be shown, arguing that Ford's exploration of the optical unconscious — and more generally of all things visual — is his most personal and original contribution to the modernist concern for the depths of the mind.

Vision and Visuality

One of the objectives of this book is to investigate Ford's association with painting and other media: music, sculpture and visual technologies (such as photography and early cinema), along with forms of popular entertainment (namely the music hall and vaudeville). The scope of Ford's involvement with visual arts is well-known yet largely unexplored as far as his interest for the avant-gardes is concerned. Undermining the cliché critical representation of Ford as the last Pre-Raphaelite or proto-Futurist at best, this study aims at opening up new perspectives on Ford's fascination with the visual field, revealing for the first time his full engagement with the art of Boldini, Seurat, Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse, Vuillard, Whistler, and the Surrealists. The disclosure of his concern for the pictorial avant-gardes reinforces and adds new meaning to recent claims that Ford was a truly modernist writer on the same level as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Of course, there are many ways of looking at a writer's association with the arts. Ford's significant involvement with painting is tackled here from a very specific angle (by no means the only possible one): that of the logic of the gaze, the desiring eye or 'scopic drive', that is, the visual implications of the ego's traffic with the unconscious.

Ford was also interested in the forms of mechanical visuality which were newly offered to the modern observer. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the hegemony of the written word was shattered by the arrival of media technologies that offered novel ways of communicating and storing data. How did Ford respond to the redefinition of referentiality these innovations implied? What was his viewpoint on and creative engagement with the issue of the art work in the

age of mechanical reproduction? How did he respond to the fact that the hegemony of painting had been defied by the arrival of photography and cinema? My aim is to try and answer these questions by relating them to the theme of the gaze. Part history part theoretical discussion embedded in the close reading of the texts, this book analyses Ford's concern for the new issues this revolution of vision implied: the society of the spectacle, the simulacrum, the abstraction of perception, the redefinition of cultural relationships, artistic originality *vs*. mass consumption and production. The Impressionist belief that a novel should 'above all make you see' is read here in the light of the theories on visual culture for which the past two decades have witnessed an explosion of interest, research, and writing within the humanities and social sciences. My arguments draw inspiration from psychoanalysis and art criticism, capitalising on the theories of Jacques Lacan, Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, Jonathan Crary, and Norman Bryson amongst others with the aim to disclose the fascinating and baffling universe of Ford's gaze. The book is no less concerned with Ford as a stylist in so far as his writing tried — through its phonologic and syntactic rhythms, its pointillist juxtapositions of words as 'spots of colour', its use of musical techniques drawn from musicians as diverse as Schubert, Bach and Couperin — iconically to project an image of itself and its spatial structures.

Most of my analyses are centred around Ford's perception of artistic or technologically-produced images. But not all of them: the investigation of the inter-art analogy is always subordinated to the overarching concern of the book for the scopic drive; all the pictures analysed here (whether perceptive, mental, pictorial, or technological) are seen in this light. But then again the hallucinatory intensity of Ford's perception is well-known: it was recognised by Pound ('That Ford was almost an *halluciné*', he wrote, 'few of his intimates can doubt')[4] and is intelligently analysed by Max Saunders who, using

4 Ezra Pound, 'Ford Madox (Hueffer) Ford; Obit.', in *Pound/Ford. The Story of a Literary Friendship. The Correspondence between Ezra Pound and Ford Madox Ford, and Their Writings about Each Other*, ed. Brita Lindberg-Seyersted (New York: New Directions, 1982), 172.

Freud, clearly states his case on the eidetic quality of Ford's vision.[5] This subjective and psychological approach is resumed here for further enquiry but also, and most importantly, to be set in the context of the visual culture of Ford's time.

Along the lines of Crary's and Krauss's insights into modernist vision, I argue for the imbrication of avant-garde experimentation and mechanical reproduction in Ford's way of seeing. His gaze is often shown here to be at the point of junction between painting and technology: on the one hand Ford believes in the artist's originality and epiphanic revelation, on the other he is aware that twentieth century episteme is firmly grounded on questions of standardisation or seriality. Borrowing Hal Foster's definitions, these two aspects of visual experience will be referred to as *vision* and *visuality* respectively.[6] The former designates the physiological and psychological features of perception whereas the latter defines the way perception can be revised through various social and cultural filters, operating through the techniques and technologies of representation. The former points to the datum of vision, the latter to a more mixed way of seeing ascribable to the impact of new media on modern optics. My analysis will be played in a constant back and forth between these two terms. It will seek to investigate, in Ford, the relationship between body and technology which is such a prominent issue in today's society of the spectacle. I will argue that in spite of its seemingly exclusive allegiance to the aesthetics of modernism, Ford's fiction is also about our modern condition and the age of mechanical reproduction described at its very inception.

The harbingers of contemporary mass culture have been traced back to the rich technorama — ranging from the diorama to the daguerreotype and early cinema — that developed from the opening decades of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth, holding hosts of ravished spectators with its images. These were pictures of unprecedented mimetism; highly credible copies of reality

5 See Saunders, '"To make you see"', 62.

6 See Hal Foster, *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), ix–xiv. Yet, the two terms are slightly redefined here to suit the themes, scope, and historical context of this book.

which, nevertheless, being 'magically' recreated — conjured up from nothing, as it were — had somehow lost touch with the real world they meant to represent. Their radical severance from reality started to produce a new, modern subject: an alienated consumer of visions which were relatively indifferent to worldly reference. As Crary contends, 'some of the most pervasive means of producing 'realistic' effects in mass culture, such as the stereoscope, were in fact based on a radical abstraction and reconstruction of optical experience'.[7] Perception detached itself from reality to be arbitrarily rebuilt whereas the subject, bombarded with mechanical stimulations, seemed partly to lose control of his or her own visions and fantasies. It is precisely this kind of observation that comes to the fore in Ford's writings. The Fordian character is a *flâneur* and insatiable consumer of all manner of images: paintings and landscapes, photographs and cinematic pictures, shopping centres — think of the 'Burlington Arcade' where Dowell often imagines Ashburnham 'striding down' (*GS* 32) — or ocean crossings. These backgrounds are always indefinite, mobile, and interchangeable; early expressions of what Benjamin would later describe in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936) and *The Arcades Project* (the unfinished work on nineteenth century Paris conceived in the second half of the 1920s): Benjamin, as Crary reminds us,

> saw the art museum in the mid-nineteenth century as simply one of many dream spaces, experienced and traversed by an observer no differently from arcades, botanical gardens, wax museums, casinos, railway stations, and department stores.[8]

This 'radical abstraction'[9] proper to an incipient society of the spectacle — with all its well-known implications including seriality, the loss of aura, the fragmentation and randomness of perception — has recently been compared to another, more familiar abstraction which revolutionised painting at the end of the nineteenth century.

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7 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1998), 9.

8 Ibid., 23

9 Ibid., 9.

This innovation came mainly as a response to photography whose perfect rendition of reality, thwarting art's mimetic efforts, led painting to focus on decorative and autotelic experimentation. As a result, painting came to be regarded no longer as the mere depiction of the world — whose representation was delegated to the camera eye — but as the expression of the painter's subjective and intuitive universe, of a vision deemed more innocent and original, in that unfiltered by technology. Today this romantic and heroic myth of the artist has partly been reappraised; especially on the premise that a secret and long unacknowledged link can be detected between modernist art and the images of mass society. This connection is grounded in features such as repetition, mobility, seriality, and abstraction from the referent. According to Crary and Krauss — whose new histories of the image estrange us from more familiar ones, both modernist and structuralist — these features inform photographic seriality no more significantly than, for example, Mondrian's compositions (from the divisionism of his early works to his later compositions of lines and squares). Avant-garde vision and mass visuality are 'overlapping components of a single social surface'[10] and can be traced back to the same epistemic matrix: both of them depart from 'Cartesian perspectivalism'[11] — with its model of truthful perception, its bipolarity of the transcendental subject and the still reality out there — and establish the body as the site of a perception totally abstracted from its referents.

My analysis of Ford's gaze will try to cast light on the fluid, impalpable quality of his images: they are suspended between two entities, the subject and the outer world, whose substantiality has become hypothetical and evanescent. Let us consider, in this connection, the patches of colour which, in *The Good Soldier*, appear on the canvas of Dowell's memory or the pictures which, in the absence of the object, Tiejtiens's eyes duplicate with hallucinatory definition in *Parade's End*: 'His eyes, when they were tired, had that trick of reproducing images on their retinas with that extreme clearness'

10 Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 5.

11 Hal Foster, 'Preface' to *Vision and Visuality*, x.

(*NMP* 299). But also consider the following extract from *The Rash Act* where the sudden realisation that Alice's secret is her homosexual and aggressive nature comes to Henry under the guise of an unreal, dream-like, and nightmarish apparition:

> [Hugh] grabbed one's shoulder and gabbled irrelevant nonsense whilst one was engrossed. Gazing into clear sea water at *infusoria*. [Henry] didn't know what *infusoria* were…. He said:
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> 'In the Roman Catholic days the saints were supposed to have the ear of God. So if you were one of the elect….'
>
> He didn't know what *infusoria* were. But during the last month at Carqueiranne he had several times spent half an hour or so looking down into rock-pools. There were rocks below and to the left of the hotel. There was practically no tide in the Mediterranean but waves came up now and then. They left pools when they receded. In the stereoscopic depths little beasts ran about and opened and waved tentacles. He considered himself to be, now, gazing into a still pool at the bottom of which was Mrs. Percival. Amongst the wavering weeds of course, Alice was somewhere wavering about her…. As the male spider desultorily wavers around the female…. Until he makes his final dash…. He had never before thought of Alice as detrimental…. Nefarious…. He did now! That was probably her secret. (132)

Interestingly, this passage is reminiscent of Picasso's *Seated Bather* painted in Paris in early 1930 (Fig. 1): this work, which for many years was the emblem of the influence of Surrealism on Picasso, represents a female figure closely resembling an insect and armed with the jaws of a predator. According to Krauss, the picture 'evok[es] more effectively than any Masson or Miró the threat of the *vagina dentata*'.[12] The fear of the toothed womb is also present in Picasso's *Nude in an Armchair* (1929) held in the Musée Picasso, Paris and in other paintings by him at the turn of the decade. Ford, who was responsive to Picasso's paintings (see *IWN* 162 and *P* 228, 248), may have seen one of these pictures in Picasso's study in Paris (Ford knew the painter well and, on many occasions, also visited Gertrude Stein whose home at 27 Rue de Fleurus hosted a large collections of paintings by the Spaniard as well as other artists of the time). Of course, it would be rash to insist on a direct influence of these paintings on

12 R. E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1985), 23.

Ford, but it is indubitable that his description of Alice is perfectly in tune with the canvases painted by Picasso in this period, especially *The Seated Bather*.

Ford's passage suggests his receptiveness to contemporary art; an interest which is not confined to a particular period or movement but evolves throughout his career in defiance of the clichés depicting him as the last Pre-Raphaelite or as Impressionist in his pictorial preferences. In Ford's early novel *A Call* (1910), for example, the description of Ellida evokes *Mademoiselle Lanthelme* (1907)[13] and similar paintings by the Italian Giovanni Boldini, the portraitist par excellence of the belle époque:

> On the steps of the church, Robert Grimshaw was greeted by his cousin, Ellida Langham, whose heavily patterned black veil, drooping hat of black fur, and long coat all black with wide black sleeves, enhanced the darkness of her coal-black eyes, the cherry colour of her cheeks, and the rich red of her large lips. Holding out her black-gloved hand with an odd little gesture, as if at the same time she were withdrawing it, she uttered the words:
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> 'Have you heard anything of Katya?' Her head seemed to be drawn back, birdlike, into the thick furs on her neck and her voice had in it a plaintive quality. (9)

Yet, if we move forwards to the end of Ford's narrative production, we see that his pictorial references have changed altogether. In *The Rash Act* (1933) and *Henry for Hugh* (1934), for example, a significant influence of Matisse's canvases of the 1920s and early 1930s can be detected, which is proof of Ford's continuous responsiveness to the evolution of the pictorial scene.

But let us return to the image of Alice depicted as an insect. The chain of associations it implies is significant. Firstly, it suggests that Mrs. Percival is Alice's prey. Secondly, the latter is depicted as an infusorium, that is an organism whose features — an only hole, which is both mouth and anus, and a ciliate cuticle — call to mind the form of the eye. Thirdly, one should not fail to notice the medusal power of enchantment and immobilisation ('one was engrossed. Gazing'), as well as the experience of visual recession ('depths') into the watery,

13 The painting is displayed at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Modena, Rome.

hollow womb of this eye (which is itself a 'still pool'). On top of all this, Alice's eye is significantly associated with the stereoscope. The stereoscopic image, the static forerunner of the 3–D film, was produced by juxtaposing two photographs of the same object taken from different angles and was often visualised in terms of scenic projection (Fig. 2). The perception generated by these images was one in which every object appeared perfectly and almost hypnotically focused. Yet the space separating the forms was not one of gradual recession; rather the observer experienced 'a vertiginous uncertainty about the distance separating forms'.[14] As Krauss underlines, the stereoscope could project so enhanced a perspectival gradation as to plunge the observer into a sort of optical abyss:

> Organized as a kind of tunnel vision, the experience of deep recession is insistent and inescapable. This experience is heightened by the fact that the viewer's own ambient space is masked out by the optical instrument he must hold before his eyes. As he views the image in an ideal isolation, his own surrounds, with their walls and floors, are banished from sight. The apparatus of the stereoscope mechanically focuses all attention on the matter at hand and precludes the visual meandering experienced in the museum gallery as one's eyes wander from picture to picture and to surrounding space […].
>
> When Holmes characterizes this special modality of viewing, where 'the mind feels its way into the very depths of the picture,' he has recourse to extreme mental states, like hypnotism, 'half-magnetic effects,' and dream. 'At least the shutting out of surrounding objects, and the concentration of the whole attention which is a consequence of this, produce a dream-like exaltation', he writes, 'in which we seem to leave the body behind us and sail away into one strange scene after another, like disembodied spirits' […].
>
> It is in this very term — *view* — by which the practice of stereoscopy identified its object, that we can locate the particularity of that experience. First of all, *view* speaks to the dramatic insistence of the perspectivally organized depth I have been describing. This was often heightened, or acknowledged, by the makers of stereo views by structuring the image around a vertical marker in fore- or middle ground that works to *center* space, forming a representation within the visual field of the eyes' convergence at a vanishing point.[15]

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14 Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 125.

15 Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 136–39. The poet and physician Oliver Wendell Holmes was the inventor of the stereoscope. He described his optical device in 'The Stereoscope and the Stereograph', *Atlantic Monthly* 3 (June 1859), 738–48; 'Sun-Painting and Sun-Sculpture', *Atlantic Monthly* 8

As early as 1893, Arthur Symons sensed the connection between the hallucinatory visual quality of literary Impressionism and optical artifices. Echoing Edmond de Goncourt, Symons writes: 'An opera-glass — a special, unique way of seeing things — that is what the Goncourts', the inventors of the Impressionist style in literature, 'have brought to bear upon the common things about us'. According to Symons, 'They have never sought "to see life steadily, and see it whole": their vision has always been somewhat feverish, with the diseased sharpness of over-excited nerves […]. But it is this morbid intensity in seeing and seizing things that has helped to form that marvelous style'.[16] This quality is also prominent in Ford's writing. If he associates Picasso's surreal painting with the artificiality of stereoscopic perception it is, precisely, for their common hypnotic, delirious nature, as well as the feeling of violent and inexorable 'swallowing' that they both seem to imply. Otherwise, the two experiences are very different on the aesthetic level. One aspires to embody the artist's unique revelation, the magic and visionary sign of the 'secret' disclosed to his privileged conscience. The other is a mechanical visuality which reproduces reality artificially in three dimensions for the entertainment of a passive observer merely intent on consuming the show. Then, how should Henry's hallucination be defined: a unique revelation or a deception produced by an optical device? Is it the epiphany of Ford the modernist writer or, in a manner of speaking, the trick of Ford the image technician? This ambiguous scopic field pervades Ford's novels: it defines a threshold world, both visionary and mystifying, which Ford — for whom impressions, if often unreliable, are truer than reality itself — chooses as the central tenet of his aesthetic creed, exploring its captivating implications as well as its slippery and elusive facets. There is a fundamental ambivalence in Ford's images of hallucinatory attentiveness: they imply on the one hand the experience of rapt concentration and intensity of revelation and on the other hand the intuition of vacancy. It is interest-

(July 1861), 14–15; and 'Doings of the Sunbeam', *Atlantic Monthly* 12 (July 1863), 1–15.

16 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 26 (1893), 860.

ing to notice that this mental condition verging on insanity, dreaming, trance, and other borderline states was increasingly diagnosed by the early twentieth century and vaguely designated clinically as 'a feeling of unreality'.[17] Crary convincingly argues that its cause was the growing impact of visual technologies on perception and that the feeling of emptiness and losing touch with one's self were generated by the concentrated and fixed attention demanded by new visual devices. In this connection, Crary also underscores Bergson's fear and consequent dismissal of these experiences as 'having no revelatory, affirmative, or creative value' and 'posing a dangerous dissolution of ego's boundaries'.[18] This is the reason why Ford's visionary moments of unreality, which imply the (often traumatic) sense of this vacancy, differ altogether from Bergson's epiphanies with their sense of the plenitude of being.

The Scopic Field: Lacan and Bryson

Ford's baffled and baffling way of seeing constitutes the object of my almost (Fordianly) *halluciné* focalisation of his writing through the magnifying glass of close reading. My aim will be to engage — as prescribed by Ford's own aesthetics — in a 'sympathetic' (*GS* 17) reception of the text in pursuit of the characters' vision: a vision Ford desired his Impressionist reader to long for and seek. This is symptomatic of his melancholy interpretation of writing as the strenuous attempt to defeat the impression's fleeting character by trying to renew it over and over again in the reader's eyes. But this aspiration is always accompanied, in his texts, by the awareness of its partial defeat. The language of literary Impressionism never succeeds entirely

17 Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception. Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1999), 324.

18 Ibid., 326.