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978-0-521-76022-5 - Sensation and Modernity in the 1860s

Nicholas Daly

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: White Years*

This is a book about culture in an age of crowds, specifically the culture – popular and elite – of Britain in the 1860s, which is marked by a recurring interest in crowds and how their attention might be solicited, held and managed. Such an interest can be related to the general forces of modernization at work in Britain in those years, but it can also be tied directly to the political transformations that saw their formal expression in the 1867 Reform Bill, which transferred a significant measure of power to the urban working class. This was the so-called ‘Leap in the Dark’ that some political commentators saw as tantamount to giving power to that allotrope of the crowd, the mob. I will be arguing that there is a connection between this political modernization and the cultural phenomenon of ‘sensation’, which runs through the 1860s. London, that other capital of the nineteenth century, is the focus for much of the discussion, though a number of the figures we will consider – popular playwright Dion Boucicault and fine artist James McNeill Whistler, for example – had transnational careers, and many of the cultural phenomena, from sensation melodrama to blackface minstrelsy, escape the borders of any one national culture.¹

This is also in part a book about a recurring image, the woman in white, a vulnerable, even ethereal figure who yet has the power to spellbind the crowd, which is rarely represented as either vulnerable or ethereal. The first such Woman in White appears not in Britain, but in France. On 11 February 1858, a fourteen-year-old French girl, Bernadette Soubirous, her sister, Toinette, and a neighbour’s child, Jeanne Abadie, went out to gather firewood. They wandered out of the Pyrenean town where they lived until they came to the Massabielle Grotto, by the river Gave. Here, the other two crossed the river, but when Bernadette began to remove her stockings to cross, she went into a trance-like state, and saw something out of this world. In early accounts she seems to have described this entity simply as ‘quelo’, the Occitan word for ‘that’ (Bernadette did not learn standard French until some years later), or as ‘dama’ or ‘demaïselà’, a White

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Lady or fairy queen of the kind that appears in the folklore of the region. Questioned afterwards by a local priest, she described her vision as of 'something white, which had the appearance of a lady'.² Later she would describe it as a figure in white, carrying a rosary and wearing a blue sash, all part of the traditional iconography of the Virgin Mary.

There would be further visions. By 1 March, groups of 1,500 or so people were coming with her to the cave, and the authorities decided to fence off the site to control the crowds. People came in the belief that the entranced Bernadette was seeing Mary, the mother of Jesus, or, as she reportedly styled herself to the visionary, the Immaculate Conception.³ The *London Times* soon picked up the story, not least, perhaps, because it was pleased to observe that for all the splendour of Napoleon III's Paris, France still laboured under a 'strange mixture of irreligion and superstition'.⁴

The Times greeted the reports from Lourdes with something close to contempt, but in the decade following Bernadette's experience a number of similar apparitions manifested themselves throughout the city. 'Pepper's Ghost', the vitreous spectre that was all the rage as a theatrical special effect in 1862–3 is, perhaps, the best known of these secular spirits. At the Royal Polytechnic Institution, the Adelphi Theatre and a number of the music halls, this optical illusion created for the audience

the impression of a person clearly visible and capable of appearing as one of a party, but wholly impervious to the sense of touch. The manner in which the figure suddenly vanishes, literally seeming to go nowhere, is most startling; still more surprising is its disappearance, when it gradually melts away, assuming a more filmy look, till it has attained absolute nonentity.⁵

The less commercially inclined 'Woburn Square Ghost' was to emerge in 1867. According to the 1860s memoirs of Alfred Rosling Bennett:

It was reported that the figure of a woman in white was appearing nightly amongst the trees at the northeast corner of the enclosed garden in Woburn Square, and had been seen of many. The Press noticed the matter, with the result that crowds invaded the Square after nightfall, blocked the thoroughfare and refused to be moved on. But the ghost became coy under such conditions, and although some declared they saw her plainly, the majority – including myself – were not so fortunate, and some felt considerably aggrieved. The sensation persisted for a week or two and then died away. What the true facts were never transpired, but the evidence in favour of some sort of apparition was very strong ... Our Lady of Woburn Square had a good and lively (for a ghost at least) innings.⁶

But there were also more subtle aftershocks of the events at Lourdes in the literature, drama and fine art of the 1860s. In *The Woman in White*, Wilkie Collins's seminal 'sensation novel' of 1859–60, drawing master Walter

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Hartright becomes embroiled in a complicated plot by villains Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco to steal a young woman's identity. The first of many narrative jolts comes in the form of his chance moonlit encounter on the road to London with a mysterious young woman, clad from head to toe in ghostly white. This 'extraordinary apparition' seems 'as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven'.⁷ The success of the novel when published in serial form in *All the Year Round* (Dickens's tuppenny weekly magazine) reached beyond the usual middle-class novel-reading public, though it may have only touched upon that more heterogeneous 'Unknown Public' that Collins uneasily describes in an essay of 1858 in *Household Words*, 'a public to be counted by millions; the mysterious, the unfathomable, the universal public of the penny-novel-Journals'.⁸

The first of the 1860s 'sensation plays', special-effects-driven melodramas, was Dion Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), in which the son of the manor wants to extricate himself from a secret marriage to a poor young woman, Eily O'Connor. The crowds came to see the great 'sensation scene', in which Eily is saved from drowning in a moonlit water cave, a secular grotto in which the play's hero, Myles, also distils illegal spirits. Boucicault borrowed most of his plot from Gerald Griffin's novel *The Colleen Bawn* (1829), the title of which phonetically reproduces the Irish *cailín bán*, sometimes translated 'darling girl', but literally meaning white or fair girl. Myles makes his famous 'header' to save Eily when he sees 'something white' in the water. Like *The Woman in White*, Boucicault's *Colleen Bawn* was a great popular success, and inspired a wide range of spin-offs, including an opera, *The Lily of Killarney*, whose title continues the white theme. (This floral title suggests how the immaculate apparition of Lourdes shades into the more generic, secularized figures of purity and virtue in distress that are at the heart of most nineteenth-century melodrama: these heroines are delicate blossoms, orphans of the storm that is modernity, or angels cast out of the house into a cold world.⁹)

Women in white were also popping up in the fine art galleries, notably the Berners Street Gallery, off Oxford Street, where a large painting by James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *The Woman in White*, was exhibited in the summer of 1862 to a rather mixed reception. Better known now as *Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl*, or simply *The White Girl*, it represents a woman in white against a white background. The first of his attempts at a new type of 'painterly' painting, an art that would eschew narrative content for pure form, it boldly advertises its own materiality as paint on canvas. Refused by the Royal Academy, *The Woman in White* was to become a *succès de scandale* when it appeared the following year at the *Salon des Refusés*, the famous

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alternative exhibition ordered by Napoleon III to accommodate the many works that had been excluded from that year's official Salon, including a number of paintings that were to become icons of Impressionism. Fernand Desnoyers, in his pamphlet on the Salon, described Whistler as 'le plus spiritue des peintres' and the painting as a portrait of a spirit, a medium.¹⁰ Gustave Courbet, it was reported, was also struck by the work's spiritual quality: '[He] calls your picture an apparition, with a spiritual content (this annoys him); he says it's good.'¹¹ With the benefit of hindsight we can recognize Whistler's painting as a foundational work of what would become aestheticism, the movement that rejected the moral mission of Victorian art and literature for a commitment to the pursuit of form, dusting off an earlier French slogan (attributed to Théophile Gautier), *l'art pour l'art*: art for art's sake. As developed in the writings of Walter Pater from the late 1860s, this emphasis on beauty and autonomous sensuous experience would come to be one of the dominant notes of late Victorian cultural discourse. To court new impressions would be one's duty to oneself; and the question to ask of a book or painting would be: 'What effect does it really produce on me?' Whistler's aesthetic apparition would help to train a select audience in this new way of seeing.

What links these disparate cultural artefacts, other than their resonance with Lourdes, is that at the time they were all seen to be part of the new phenomenon of 'sensation'. Pepper's Ghost and the Woburn Square apparition were popular sensations; *The Woman in White* was read as a sensation novel; *The Colleen Bawn* was regarded as a sensation play; and Whistler's *Woman in White* was viewed as a daring sensation picture. I will return to a more detailed discussion of what 'sensation' means in the chapters that follow, which look at the popular and high culture of the 1860s. For now it might be helpful to think of sensation as the cultural dominant of the 1860s; it was a way of describing cultural artefacts that deployed a variety of shock and suspense effects, but more generally its use seems to mark a perceived shift in the cultural market, a disruption of culture consumption stratified by class.¹²

For some commentators, the novels, plays and paintings of the age of sensation seemed to appeal too much to the crowd, providing a series of shocks and frissons rather than any more elevating aesthetic experience. 'Sensation' is a term that denotes a physiologically based theory of reader/viewer response, and it appears in counterpoint to the growth of the mass market as a component of the spread of social modernity. But political modernity is also relevant here: as Jonathan Loesberg pointed out some twenty years ago, it is not a coincidence that the decade that witnesses

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the appearance of sensation is also marked by debates about the Reform Act that for the first time enfranchised large numbers of working-class men.¹³ It will be my contention here that the years of women in white, and indeed of sensation more generally in the cultural realm, are the same years in which the crowd comes to be seen as usurping social and political authority. In an earlier study, *Literature, Technology, and Modernity* (2004), I suggested that sensation novels and sensation drama produced a sort of ‘training’ in modernity, acclimatizing people to the pace of industrial, urban life through homeopathic doses of shock and suspense. Here I want to argue that such training was not a politically neutral phenomenon. The novels and plays of the 1860s cannot be seen in any straightforward way as simply disciplinary apparatuses in the Foucauldian sense, but I would argue that their use of sensation to capture and hold the attention of heterogeneous audiences can be linked to largely reactionary fantasies about the crowd in the years of Reform. That these novels and plays also often seem to suggest the impossibility of holding the self or the crowd together complicates this connection, but it does not cancel it.

We often reserve the term the ‘age of crowds’ to describe the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the period that is marked by the publication of Gustave Le Bon’s *La Psychologie des Foules* (1895), Gabriel Tarde’s *L’Opinion et la Foule* (1901) and Gerald Stanley Lee’s *Crowds: A Moving Picture of Democracy* (1913), as well as by Frederick Winslow Taylor’s *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911).¹⁴ However, it is possible to bring the age of crowds forward, anchoring it instead to, say, Edgar Allan Poe’s prescient ‘Man of the Crowd’ (1840), Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) and Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1868) in the cultural realm; the Great Exhibition of 1851 in the economic; and the 1867 Reform Bill in the political. Closely bound up with the interest in crowds is the issue of consumption. In this period we see the further consolidation of the mass consumerism that had been signalled by the commodity-driven phantasmagoria of the Great Exhibition of 1851, and its many sequels, that saw people embark on secular pilgrimages, ‘on the move to look at merchandise’, as Hippolyte Taine put it.¹⁵ This shift in Britain from self-definition in terms of production to self-definition in terms of consumption makes leisure a problem as well as a pleasure for the middle classes. As Peter Bailey describes, from mid-century there appears a new concern with the issue of leisure, in part because the middle classes simply had more of it, but also because it was an area of social life that presented new problems of distinction. Bailey cites the comments of journalist Matthew Browne, who wrote that ‘social boundary lines are not so

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sharply drawn as they used to be . . . the old cordon sanitaires have snapped under the pressure of the multitudes and we have not succeeded in twisting new ones'.¹⁶ If the countryside still represented a relatively transparent social world, in which such leisure activities as fox-hunting allowed for participation according to rank, the leisure sphere in the cities, towns and seaside-resorts was socially opaque (we might see the enormous popularity of hunting yarns and hunting prints as symptoms of nostalgia for a more stable world of organic hierarchy). The lifting of the 'taxes on knowledge' as well as improvements in printing technology meant that cheaper newspapers and literature were part of this new landscape of leisure.

The coming of the mass market involves, by definition, a blurring of the lines of stratified consumption – it becomes difficult to label things as 'middle-class goods', or for that matter 'working-class goods', and this applies to cultural commodities as much as it does to more tangible ones. When access to entertainment is by purchase – of an excursion ticket, or theatre ticket, say, or of a book or mass-reproduced image – it is much harder to police participation. Pricing, of course, provided one attempt to regulate such consumption, but it was not by any means a reliable method. In this light the growth of a professionalized leisure industry, providing a wider and more variegated range of entertainments, is an important factor. But if the leisure sphere becomes a more contested area, and one in which commentators are increasingly concerned about who is watching, reading or listening to what, this is also complexly related to developments in the political realm, where older class certainties were facing collapse. At the beginning of the 1860s there was no interest among the Tories in extending the franchise, and even one of the most prominent Whigs, Lord John Russell, was known as 'finality John' because of his view that the 1832 Reform Act was the last word on the subject: the more prosperous echelons of the middle class had political power to match their economic might, and this was quite enough for even the liberals in the political establishment, with a few notable exceptions. And yet Reform was very much in the air, and by the end of the decade radical changes were to take place: the 1867 Act for the first time gives the vote to substantial sections of the working class. From the point of view of the ruling classes, it looked as if the masses were taking over.

When we recognize that democracy was the spectre haunting Britain in the late 1850s and 1860s, it becomes easier to understand not just the politics of culture in the period, but also more general political dispositions. In the sphere of culture, some of the more heated rhetoric around 'sensation' can be recognized as part of a war of position around Reform. The

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shrill response in some quarters to sensation drama, sensation novels, sensation songs, sensation paintings, and so on, encoded fears that at a time when political power appeared to be shifting towards the working class, the sphere of culture was not functioning to secure class distinction, as West End audiences and middle-class readers yielded to the pleasures of vulgar transpontine effects (viz. those associated with the working-class theatres of Westminster and beyond). As Andrew Maunder notes, among the recurring attitudes in the reviews of the period is that sensation novels 'were the offspring of the debilitating influence of modern commercial culture, and working-class culture'.¹⁷ One of the most famous contemporary reviews, that of H. L. Mansel, sees the highly coloured publications of the penny and halfpenny press (i.e. 'penny dreadfuls') as 'the original germ, the primitive monad, to which all the varieties of sensational literature may be referred, as to their source'.¹⁸ In July 1866 the *Westminster Review* saw sensation as a contagion spreading 'in all directions from the penny journal to the shilling magazine, and from the shilling magazine to the 30-shilling volume'.¹⁹ Cartoons that show servants taking a keen interest in sensation fiction embody similar views, and such assumptions persist after Reform: for example, the *Saturday Review* in 1878 confidently declares that sensation provides 'toys for the class lowest in the social scale as well as in mental capacity'.²⁰ But of course the tricky thing was that these 'toys' strongly appealed to other classes too, making taste a very inaccurate index of social position.

The spectre of democracy in these years helps to explain attitudes to domestic cultural consumption, but it also helps us to understand British opinion on overseas events. The American Civil War dominates the headlines for much of the decade, and Britain's sympathy for the South has often been noted, alongside the misery created by the 'Cotton Famine' in Lancashire. But the hostility in many quarters to the North and sympathy for the South may have had less to do with cotton, or economics more generally (the North was protectionist), than with the perception that the Northern States of the Union represented democracy run riot. The North was perceived as a brash place in which power had been allowed to fall into the hands of immigrants and the half-educated – was not even the President a bumptious country lawyer who had once worked with his hands? By contrast, the South could be seen to represent a traditional, hierarchical, organic society, with the plantation as an image of paternalistic pastoral order, enlivened by comic or sentimental song. In this context, the slave revolt, or 'servile insurrection', that many in Britain prophesied in the South as a consequence of the war can be seen not only as a fantasy

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about race but as a displacement of fears of an analogous revolt at home among the urban working class; the vogue of blackface minstrelsy, with its celebration of orderly plantation life, can at least in part be seen as the corollary of such fantasies and fears.

If the popular and high culture of this period introduces a number of secular avatars of the Lourdes apparition, that is, I will argue, because events at Lourdes offered a suggestive scenario for those who were trying to re-imagine the place of culture in relation to an age of crowds. The trance-like state of Bernadette provides a version of the states of reverie that, as Jonathan Crary has shown, are the flipside of a modernity increasingly concerned with attention, punctuality and disciplined subjectivity. But, more importantly, perhaps, Lourdes offered a paradigm of how the distracted crowd might be kept spellbound: the crowds that came to see Bernadette seeing the Virgin Mary, and later just to stare at the Cave of Apparitions, indicated that the attention of the masses could be seized if only a powerful enough substitute for religious spectacle could be found. Attention, in other words, could be engineered.²¹ If one aspect of ‘sensation culture’ is a preoccupation with the tide of crowd-pulling novelties and spectacular entertainments that threatened to overwhelm the lines of good taste, the other is an interest in just how the wandering gaze of a mass subject might be held. In the chapters that follow I want to look at the way in which a number of cultural artefacts of the 1860s – novels, plays and paintings, as well as other more ephemeral forms – took up the issue of attraction, or how attention might be solicited in an age of crowds. The imagination of alternative versions of community was also important as we will see, many of these artefacts incorporate heterotopian fantasies of a non-modern, non-urban, pastoral world, whether that of the ante-bellum South or of rural Ireland.

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That the 1860s are years of social and political transformation is a fact registered not just in the popular and high culture of the period, but in the solidly middlebrow political novels of the period. Equidistant from sensation and aestheticism alike, the realist novels of Anthony Trollope clearly document the seismic shifts that were under way. In the Palliser novel sequence, Trollope’s Irish hero, Phineas Finn, begins his political career in *Phineas Finn* (1869) by standing for a pocket borough in rural Ireland, Loughshane, a seat very much in the gift of his father’s friend, the Earl of Tulla. His second seat, Loughton, is also more or less handed to him on a plate by the aristocracy, this time by the father of his friend

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Lady Laura: the Earl of Brentford, a Whig grandee. But in *Phineas Redux* (1874), the passing of the 1867 Bill means that such pocket boroughs have all but disappeared, and Phineas has to make efforts to woo the working-class voters of Tankerville, a dreary coal-mining town near Durham (in fact, despite his eloquence he loses the election, but is awarded the seat when his Tory rival is found to have bribed voters). Phineas's efforts to be a popular orator are not the only signs in the Palliser novels of the changing base of power: the prominence of the penny press is evident in the frequent appearances of Quintus Slide, assistant editor and later editor of the *People's Banner*, who not only has the effrontery, as Finn sees it, of considering himself a gentleman, but even contemplates running for office.

Other, less clear-cut, forms of transition also underlie the appearance of sensation. Considered physiologically, sensation does not appear in a vacuum, but in the context of more general debates about the nature of sensory experience in a world transformed by industrial technologies, by urbanization, and by the nascent consumer culture that appears embryonically in the great international exhibitions and in more mature form in the new department stores. Lieven de Cauter has argued that the mid-nineteenth century gives rise to a strand of cultural criticism that links the visual excess of modernity to the impossibility of the classical unified subject. This line can be traced from Baudelaire's kaleidoscopic subject in the age of exhibitions, reflecting back the chaotic visual abundance around him, to Benjamin's distracted crowd, to Fredric Jameson's account of the postmodern subject, for whom cognitive mapping is all but impossible as he or she tries to find the elevator at the Bonaventure hotel.²² In a different but related account of the sensory impact of modernization, Jonathan Crary, in *Suspensions of Perception*, argues that after mid-century there arises a conception of the normative modern subject as not just isolated and cellularized, as Michel Foucault has told us, but also focused and alert even in a dazzling and mobile world. Attention and attentiveness are the keywords of a new discourse that imagines a focused subject who can withstand the sensory saturation of modernity, and be trained to maintain a productive focus. But this discourse was troubled by 'the realization that attention had limits beyond and below which productivity and social cohesion were threatened'; that forms of focused attention on one stimulus can tip over into states of distraction, daydream and reverie.²³ Tony Bennett has likewise argued that from the mid-nineteenth century the state begins to entertain hopes that exhibitions and museums could be used to harness attention in productive ways, and that the wandering modern subject of

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Sunday leisure might be disciplined into forms of national subjectivity: the exhibition of material culture could function in a sort of reverse panopticon.²⁴ The artefacts of sensation culture share this ambivalence about the modern subject. It is possible, as D. A. Miller showed us in *The Novel and the Police* some twenty years ago, to read the sensation novel as part of the disciplinary apparatuses of modernizing Britain; but it is also possible to see that these novels often dwell on the failure of the stable, centred subject – states of reverie are as prevalent as the alert consciousness of the detective, that focused private eye. In sensation fiction, and more obviously in sensation drama and painting, the dyad of riveted attention and distraction is not only thematized, but is made the animating principle of the entertainment: the reader or viewer is gripped, but what grips us is often the display of distraction or madness; tightly plotted narratives that turn on particular sensation scenes mean that much of what we read or see is consumed almost blindly. If these novels, plays and paintings are machines of attention, they also regularly seem to despair of the possibilities of control of either the self or others.

In this study of the politics of culture in the 1860s, whiteness and sensation may be seen as two threads that take us through some of the decade's key cultural artefacts. As it appears in *The Woman in White*, *The Colleen Bawn* and *Symphony in White, No. 1*, whiteness operates as an index of spectacle and attentiveness across three media (at least), and appears in complex conjunction with the issue of sensation. Sensation may in turn be seen to involve a number of overlapping ideas: (a) a physiological, and politically neutral, concept of reader/audience response; (b) a rather less neutral discourse regarding the dilution of real culture by a culture of shock, sensation and 'effect' – as Martin Meisel has shown, the term 'effect' evokes an opposition between organic/classical form and cultural artefacts where that form is broken up, sacrificed to cheap thrills of immediate response; and (c) an assumption, linked to (b), that such 'effects' ultimately derive from across the river Thames, from working-class theatres, an assumption that presumably rests on a more fundamental equation of the working class with body rather than soul – and which suggests in turn that (a) is not so politically neutral after all. Class is not the only axis of difference here: whiteness and sensation also open onto a separate if related context for self-definition in these years, race and ethnicity, and women in white always exist in contrast to other imagined figures – darker, more corporeal figures. Thus in the years leading up to the 1867 Reform Act the newspapers and magazines give extensive coverage to the American Civil War (1861–5), debates around race in the wake of Darwin's *Origin of Species*