

INTRODUCTION

Joyce's Spectacles
Technologies of Sight

Describing the “pictorial” composition of the “Nausicaa” episode of *Ulysses*, Frank Budgen observes, “It must be regarded as something of a wonder that the seen thing should play the great part it does play in the writing of a man whose sight was never strong” (211). The history of Joyce’s manifold eye ailments has been well documented by Richard Ellmann, Roy Gottfried Gordon Bowker and others: his boyhood need for corrective lenses; frequent episodes of conjunctivitis, glaucoma, synechia and cataracts; sudden attacks of iritis that left him writhing on the ground and confined him to darkened rooms; arsenic injections and numerous operations on his “obstinate eye” beginning in 1917 as he composed *Ulysses* – procedures he dreaded and often delayed (*SL* 305). At their first meeting in 1918, Budgen immediately noted Joyce’s “heavily glassed eyes” and how the transition from light to shade made him “unsure” of the location of the garden furniture (11). Throughout his memoir, Budgen recalls the perspectival methods and optical devices Joyce employed in attempts to compensate for his deteriorating vision. Noting the numerous reproductions of Old Masters, particularly Vermeer, in Joyce’s Zurich apartment, he reports seeing “him take pictures, when their size allowed him to do so, and look at them close up near a window like a myope reading small print” (185). Earlier, Budgen records a conversation with Joyce in Locarno, where the writer had fled in an attempt to stave off an attack of iritis. Showing his friend a leaf from his *Ulysses* notebook, Joyce asked “Take a look at this, will you . . . I can’t make head or tail of it.” Unable to read his own “multitude of criss-cross notes,” he then handed Budgen his “huge oblong magnifying glass,” but the magnification enlarged the “pencil smudges” while revealing only “the foggy shapes of letters” (172–3). Paul Leon recalls Joyce’s anguish and regret at his lost vision on a September day in Paris when a young woman “complimented him on his work: scanning the outdoor scene, Joyce remarked, ‘You would

do better . . . to admire the sky or even these poor trees’.” “This was not false modesty,” Leon notes, “but a genuine admiration for the natural universe; for its colours which he could hardly distinguish, but which he appreciated all the more fully in consequence; for the constant mobility of its forms, whether pleasing or unshapely” (qtd. in Tully 49). As Leon suggests, Joyce’s desire to perceive and record the visible world grew almost in direct proportion to his optical diminishment, and this urgency began not long after he left Dublin. Writing to Stanislaus from Rome in 1906, he complains of a “flaw in both glasses” of his “crooked” spectacles, and the inconvenience of the pince-nez he began wearing around his neck the previous year: “It is a bloody nuisance to have to carry bits of glass in your eye.” Tellingly, Joyce expresses these frustrations in disclosing a deeper creative anxiety in the language of sight: “I am afraid all the things I was going to write about have become uncapturable images” (*SL* 140).

This study argues that *Ulysses*, composed as Joyce’s vision deteriorated a decade later, is his ultimate act of capturing and preserving the eye’s encounter with reality, a transaction conducted via the gazes of Stephen and Bloom and through a multitude of refractory narrative lenses. Curiously, not all of Joyce’s contemporaries shared Budgen’s understanding that “sight is the sense most in evidence” in the novel (221). Some, in fact, read (and misread) Joyce’s epic through the veil of the author’s diminished vision. Tim Armstrong notes that Ezra Pound regarded “Joyce’s focus on the word” in certain late chapters of *Ulysses* as “a precise reflection of his worsening eyesight,” a physical and aesthetic defect Pound sought to “correct” in 1917 by recommending the optical “rebalancing” treatment of the American sight-cure exponent George H. Gould (88–89). Henry Miller held that Joyce’s “deformity of vision” had a “depressing, crippling, dwarfing” effect on his fiction; his ocular degeneration produced a “defect of soul” that made *Ulysses* hopelessly “obscure” and rendered *Work in Progress* unreadable. As Joyce’s eyesight “atrophied,” Miller insists, he abandoned interest in the visible world of “men and women, rivers and trees” for the “dead dust of books” (209–10). Sergei Eisenstein, though an ardent admirer of *Ulysses*, similarly entwines the author’s near blindness with a reading of his work. In an autobiographical fragment, the Russian director recounts his meeting with Joyce in November 1919: after discussing his silent films with the expectation his guest would be viewing them, Eisenstein saw Joyce groping for his overcoat in a brightly lit hallway and formulated a new conception of his work:

Introduction

3

And it was only then that I realized how poor was the eyesight, at least for the external world, of this man, in truth almost blind, whose external blindness undoubtedly determined that particular penetration of interior vision which marks the description of intimate life in *Ulysses* and in *Portrait of the Artist* with the aid of the astonishing method of the interior monologue (51).

Eisenstein was sufficiently attuned to the kinship between Joyce's rendering of consciousness and his own practice of montage that he hailed *Ulysses* as the most significant event in the history of cinema, but he regards the novel's juxtaposition of images and deployment of shifting perspectives as purely interiorized phenomena, a compensatory style resulting from Joyce's own inability to render the eye's transactions with the external world. Eisenstein frames his assessment of *Ulysses* in the cinematic aesthetic of moving close-ups, but he describes Joyce's figurative lens as a "magnifying glass" that illuminates not physical surfaces but rather "the microscopic circumvolutions" of interior life as it tracks "the intimate movements of the emotions" (52–3). Ironically, the director's compatriot and antagonist, Communist Party chairman Karl Radek, also employed the language of mobile and magnified sight, but more precisely and concretely, in denouncing *Ulysses* at the Congress of Soviet Writers conference in 1934. Joyce's work, in Radek's view, is "a heap of dung, crawling with worms and photographed by a cinema apparatus through a microscope." Perhaps Radek had in mind Bloom's graveyard sighting of "an obese grey rat toddl[ing] along the side [a] crypt" or his study of the Glasnevin soil "swirling" with "maggots," but, unlike Eisenstein, he regards the novel's microscopy in the context of physical objects perceived by Joyce's "vile hero Bloom": "He cinematographs the day of his subject with the maximum minuteness, omitting nothing" (qtd. in Tall 137; *U* 6.973, 783–4). Ironically, in condemning Joyce's decadence, Radek draws perceptively on the metaphor of lenses, cameras and optical filters that Joyce himself employs with astonishing variety in mediating the world of 1904 Dublin.

Stanislaus uses similar figuration in elaborating on his claim that his brother "wrote to make things clear to himself." In his diary, Stanislaus distinguished between writers who are concerned "with infinite stellar spaces" from those, like Joyce, who work "at the end of a microscope." Reading this journal entry without Stanislaus's permission, Joyce acknowledged, he "might be right" (*BK* 54). However, the narrative lenses that enlarge and clarify the visible domain of *Ulysses* are both microscopic and telescopic, in keeping with Joyce's description of William Blake in his

Trieste lecture, “[f]lying from the infinitely small to infinitely large, from a drop of blood to the universe of stars.” While the mystical aim of Blake’s perceptual dialectic is to see “*beyond* the eye,” Bloom’s own disparate attempts to “make things clear for himself” focus entirely on what can be seen “*with* the eye” in the material universe (CW 222). The same roving gazer who registers, as if in close-up, the “scars of eczema” on a street girl’s face and “daubs of sugary flour stuck to [Mrs. Breen’s] cheek” strains to discern a watch glinting on the roof of the Bank of Ireland, contemplates a visit to the Dunsink Observatory outside Dublin, and once “point[ed] out all the stars and the comets” to Molly in a rattling jarvey (8.560, 5.6, 8.272, 10.567–68). Bloom’s optical curiosity ranges from the macrocosmic to the infinitesimal, and his “obverse meditations” in “Ithaca” extend from the constellation “Orion with belt and sextuple sun theta and nebula in which 100 of our solar systems could be contained” to “microbes, germs, bacteria, bacilli, spermatozoa” and “the incalculable trillions of billions of millions of imperceptible molecules contained by cohesion of molecular affinity in a single pinhead” (17.1057, 1048–50, 1060–63). Not surprisingly, Bloom owns a variety of devices for optical enhancement. The inventory of his drawer includes “a lowpower magnifying glass,” and his lunchtime thoughts also turn to long-distance viewing devices, as he prices “field-glasses” and reminds himself to get his old binoculars repaired (17.1808–9, 8.552).

Stephen’s efforts to see are as metaphysically speculative as Bloom’s are scientific, but they too are filtered through optical technology. His first impression in *Portrait* is presented through a clarifying lens – “his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face” – a mediated perspective in which the infant protagonist simultaneously sees his father’s eye behind the spectacles and is aware of himself as an object of perception (7). Stephen’s own glasses are later shattered on the cinder track at Clongowes, and he breaks them again shortly before the opening of *Ulysses*. Although he conducts visual experiments in “Proteus” and “Circe” without corrective lenses, he views the “ineluctable modality” of the visible world through certain remembered lenses – optical devices and popular attractions – as he struggles both to affirm the tangible existence of what he sees and to negotiate the ontological threat of being seen by others (3.1). Tutoring Sargent in his mathematics lesson, the boy’s “misty glasses [and] weak eyes” prompt Stephen to view his past, as if through the thick lenses he once wore as a frightened child in danger of being “trampled underfoot” (2.125, 146–47). Feeling his own “childhood bend[ing] beside” his pupil, Stephen retreats from these painful memories, assuring himself that his

Introduction

5

past life and Sargent's present remain as "secret as our eyes" (2.169–70). Yet an hour later as he walks on Sandymount Strand, Stephen tests his association of sight with epistemological privacy, subjecting to empirical scrutiny Bishop Berkeley's contention that the realm of colors and forms is merely the mind's two-dimensional projection, "thought through my eyes" (3.1–2). He conducts this perceptual experiment partly through the recollected experience of a popular nineteenth-century viewing instrument – the stereoscope – whose converging lenses mimic the operation of human binocular vision and, in so doing, call attention to the eye's anatomical structure and functioning.

The stereoscope, like the magic lantern, kaleidoscope, zoetrope and kinetoscope, was part of a progressive development in the scopic regime of modernity, which both Martin Jay and Jonathan Crary have argued is founded upon a gradual recognition and study of the eye's physiological operation. The proliferation of public diversions, such as the moving panorama, and perceptual amusements that the European public enjoyed beginning in the early nineteenth century is founded upon a break from a monocular model of visual representation derived since the Renaissance from the camera obscura. In this ancient device, external light passes through a small aperture into a dark box or room, projecting the illuminated image of the scene outside. The camera obscura cast the viewer as a disembodied subject entirely outside of a world that was depicted as "homogeneous, unified and full legible" (Crary, *Modernizing* 33). Within this paradigm, Jay notes, three-dimensional space was "rationalized" by perspectival vision "so as to be rendered on the two-dimensional surface" of a canvas (6). Neurological science challenged this Olympian perspectivism. If van Leeuwenhoek's invention of the microscope showed "the discrete particularity of visual experience," the subsequent confirmation of binocular disparity (whereby each eye sees a slightly different image), along with studies of retinal curvature and after-images, privileged "the body as a visual producer" (Jay 13; Crary, *Modernizing* 35). At the start of the nineteenth century, these studies had established the eye itself "in all its physiological density as the ground on which vision is possible" (Crary, *Modernizing* 34). By the early 1830s, experiments such as Joseph Plateau's calculation of the persistence of vision (one-third of a second) quantified and decoded optical experience, and "the doctrine of specific nerve energies redefine[d] vision" as the "empirical" perceiver's "capacity for being affected by sensations" (Crary, *Modernizing* 40). In *Techniques of the Observer*, Crary maintains that as the viewer was given a body, new scopic devices like the stereoscope and phenakistoscope emerged as manifestations of "a radical abstraction and

reconstruction of optical experience” (9). Later, in the mid-Victorian era, photography and pre-cinematic moving-image attractions like the mutoscope and kinoscope took their place as elements within “a new homogeneous terrain . . . in which the observer becomes lodged” (13). W. J. T. Mitchell has challenged this claim of an abrupt and “very specialized ‘shift’ in spectatorship.” He regards Crary’s account as an “overgeneralized master narrative” that posits a narrowly conceived and uniform nineteenth-century spectator (23). Mitchell also notes that Crary’s “transformed observer” is sometimes described as the “effect” of these innovations and, at other times, as the “cause of massive historical developments” (21). Despite this blurring, Crary’s central contention that a “crucial systemic shift” in the history of visibility “was well under way by 1820” seems borne out by the coeval emergence of numerous optical displays, instruments and gadgets within popular culture of the time, all of which inscribe a complexly embodied individual viewer (*Techniques* 7). The first three decades of the nineteenth century saw an evolution of Robert Barker’s stationary panorama: the canvases displayed along the curving walls of rotundas were automated by 1815, with mechanized scrolls at either end of a stage rolling images past the viewer’s gaze. Daguerre’s first “double effect” diorama opened in Paris, using variable lighting effects and *trompe l’oeil* backdrops to create the illusion of three-dimensional landscapes undergoing diurnal change. The venerable magic lantern, an invention of the seventeenth century, was reengineered “with the creation of the dissolving view, whereby an image could be superimposed on a similar but not identical image, which would then fade” (Rockett 42). Contemporaneous with these wonder-inducing public displays were handheld optical amusements that also relied upon the physiological processes of individual seeing. In 1816, David Brewster brought to a British marketplace hungry for visual diversion the first kaleidoscope, a changing solitary attraction using two mirrors at the end of a viewing tube; in the 1830s, Charles Wheatstone introduced the stereoscope, featuring a pair of slightly different images that demonstrated the importance of binocular depth perception; and the same decade brought the first zoetrope, a cylinder with viewing slits showing a series of segmented pictures that appeared (through persistence of vision) to move in a complete sequence of action when the device was spun.

In representing the phenomenon of sight in *Ulysses*, Joyce incorporates into Stephen’s and Bloom’s perceptions not only the manipulated perspectives and retinal effects of these early nineteenth-century attractions – all still popular in turn-of-the-century Dublin – but also the assimilated

Introduction

7

influence of later optical breakthroughs, including still photography, chronophotography, and such proto-cinematic attractions as the mutoscope and kinoscope. All of these technologies are predicated upon the physical properties of sight, which Stephen and Bloom not only practice but theorize. Stephen continues his experiments with binocular convergence at Bella Cohen's when he brings a burning match close to his open eye and reminds himself that a monocular view "sees all flat" (15.3628–29). Bloom, sitting in the twilight of Sandymount Strand, notes that "[c]olours depend on the light you see" and recalls how afterimages are produced by staring at the sun: "then look at a shoe [and] see a blotch blob yellowish" (13.1132–33). Describing *Ulysses* as an epic of the human body, Joyce reminded Budgen that the novel's characters are more than mere vessels of consciousness: "If they had no body they would have no mind . . . It's all one" (Budgen 21). Notwithstanding Stephen's lingering skepticism about the physiology of sight, Joyce situates his protagonists as enfleshed, mobile observers, and Bloom's concern with the health and strength of his optical muscles reflects Joyce's own acute awareness of the eyes' all too vulnerable physicality. In one of his earliest extant writings, the school essay "Trust Not Appearances," Joyce argues that while sight and judgment can be deceived by "the fickleness of appearances," the eye itself, as an embodied organ, "tells us the character of a man," reveals his "guilt or innocence, the vices or the virtues of the soul" (*OCPW* 3). Such perceived truth is embedded in and disclosed by the eye's corporeality. Throughout his peregrinations, Bloom attempts to discern submerged truths in the eyes of others. In "Calypso" alone he reads "the avid shameclosing eyes" of his hungry cat, catches a "speck of eager fire from [the] foxeyes" of a Jewish pork merchant, and detects Molly's eye "glance[ing]" at Boylan's letter with his own "backward eye" (4.33, 186, 256–57). At day's end, as Bloom and Stephen stand silently under the glow of Molly's window, they achieve their fullest mutual understanding through a silent study of one another's eyes, the "mirrors of [their] reciprocal flesh" (17.1183).

Long before this optical and epistemic climax, Joyce establishes the eye's materiality in *Ulysses*, both as an as object of scrutiny and as a perceiving organ. As Bloom circulates through Dublin, his eyes sometimes function as a synecdoche for the man himself: the debt-collector narrator of "Cyclops" refers to him as "old cod's eye," the Ormond Hotel barmaids identify him as "greasy eyes" and "goggle eye," and Buck Mulligan describes his "pale Galilean eyes" fixed on the "mesial groove" of a Greek goddess (12.410, 11.169, 11.146, 9.615). As this last instance indicates, Joyce often foregrounds the eye's physical functioning in describing common acts of perception.

Sara Danius notes that, throughout *Ulysses*, eyes are frequently “endowed with agency all their own,” as Joyce traces the experience of seeing and the thing observed to a bodily locus (155). Standing near a servant girl at Dlugacz’s, for example, Bloom’s “eyes rested on her vigorous hips,” gratifying his ocular hunger, much as “the shiny links, packed with forcemeat, fed his gaze” (4.142–43). This narratological body-consciousness extends even to the visual experience of minor characters like Stephen’s employer, Mr. Deasy: “His eyes open wide in vision stared sternly across the sunbeam in which he halted” (2.357–58). Danius provides an illuminating catalogue of other instances of embodied seeing in *Ulysses*, but she simplifies the characters’ complicated visual and epistemological experiences by insisting that, throughout the novel, the “gaze . . . acts on its own, as though detached from a conscious nucleus,” divorced from the subject’s emotional life and from the operation of other senses (160). The most obvious refutation of this claim is Stephen’s optical experimentation in “Proteus,” where he interrogates the mysterious interdependency of sight and cognition and the relationship between vision and touch. Similarly, Bloom’s eye is never a mechanized and autonomous bodily fragment operating separately and independently from the rest of his being. In fact, Joyce explicitly integrates Bloom’s sight with his thought, feeling and other sensory responses in a passage that Danius oddly cites as an example of the eyes’ estrangement. Hearing about Mina Purefoy’s difficult childbirth from Mrs. Breen, “His heavy pitying gaze absorbed her news. His tongue clacked in compassion. Dth!Dth!” (8.287–88). Here Bloom’s gaze is a vehicle for his mental comprehension of the pregnant woman’s discomfort (his eyes “absorbed the news”), and it is inseparable from a wave of sympathy he expresses audibly in the same moment.

Just as Joyce’s representation of sight in *Ulysses* is filtered through various perceptual and narrative lenses, so too he repeatedly invokes “spectacles” in another sense: as popular visual displays and optical technologies that altered human perception at the turn of the century. Beginning with Walter Benjamin, the social history and epistemological effects of spectacle have been widely and diversely theorized as a defining aspect of modernity. In his analysis of the spectacles of commodity culture in Victorian England, Thomas Richards reports that by the mid-nineteenth century the advancement of mobile panoramas and dioramas, using painted backdrops, transparencies, projections and combinations of lighting, was nurturing a public taste for spectacle “for the sake of the spectacle itself” (56). Such extravaganzas “conditioned their audiences always to expect more,” and the “escalation of representation” reached its “logical conclusion” in

Introduction

9

the Great Exhibition of 1851 (56–7). There, Richards argues, the monumental architecture and elaborate scenery of the Crystal Palace reified “an aesthetic confluence” of all contemporary visual technologies, making commodity culture “virtually coterminous with the symbolic apparatus of spectacle” (58). Richards regards all of London’s visual attractions as a form of advertisement in which technology – and the wonders it manufactures – became a form of entertainment. Thus, he argues, “spectacle functioned as a kind of experimental theatre for industrial capitalism” (56). Richard’s reading draws closely on Guy Debord’s influential Marxist thesis in *Society of the Spectacle* that the proliferation of manufactured images, or “representations,” in commodity culture has replaced real objects with mass-produced “appearances,” alienating perceivers from one another because “social relationships between people [are] mediated by” these simulacra (1). “Drugged by spectacular images,” the modern subject’s “concrete life” has been “degraded into a spectacular universe.” Inseparable from its capitalist roots, the domains of photography and film perpetuate the “production of isolation,” estranging observers from authentic social relations and even from their own bodies (25). Public exhibitions, which promise to engender a collective gaze, produce only an atomized pseudo-unity, just as they promulgate a “pseudo-reality” (59). Bloom, an ardent consumer, window shopper and disseminator of mass-produced images, would beg to differ with this caustic assessment. As a devotee of “snapshot photography,” collector of erotic postcards, and patron of mutoscopes, Bloom’s visual experience, though mediated by what Debord calls these “shimmering diversions,” does not estrange him either from the object world or from other people (17.1589; Debord 59). As an ad canvasser, Bloom is actively engaged in the production of the fantasy-inducing iconography Debord reviles in commodity culture. During a single day, Bloom proposes using the home rule rising sun to boost sales of Alexander Keyes’s tea and spirits, considers the economic benefits of displaying of attractive women typists in a glass-enclosed conveyance, and, just before retiring, contemplates a “unique advertisement” – a “poster novelty,” that would, like all good promotions, “cause passers to stop in wonder” (17.1770–72). Bloom understands the narcissistic enchantment of ads well enough to observe, “Best place for an ad to catch a woman’s eye on a mirror,” yet he never confuses image with object nor “lived truth” with “fraudulent appearances” (13.919–20; Debord 219).

The concept of spectacle central to this study is not socioeconomic but primarily epistemological; it embraces a variety of visual attractions that Joyce knew, from such public displays as dioramas and panoramas, to

visual amusements like mutoscopes and silent cinema, which provided a collective setting for dark-enshrouded personal pleasure. In *Ulysses* he employs these cotemporal attractions as mediums for seeing and interpreting the world; while they are capable of inducing confusion, the devices that condition Stephen's and Bloom's perception are more often sources of intellectual surmise and wonder. Changing his visual filters from episode to episode, Joyce reveals how assimilated technologies of sight inform the ways in which the novel's protagonists and narrators experience the world. In this respect, his approach to spectacle most closely resembles that of his contemporary, the painter Fernand Leger, who celebrated machine-induced changes in visual perception as a defining feature of modern experience. Rather than anesthetizing viewers, as Debord suggests, visual innovations, especially film, were awakening them from dull habits of seeing in the early twentieth century. Formulating a "machine aesthetic," Leger cites the power of cinema, especially the close-up, to reveal the beauty of everyday objects: the "cinematographic revolution *is to make us see everything that has merely been noticed*." For Leger, this includes "80 per cent of the elements" in our daily lives (21). In an essay on the director Abel Gance, published the same year as *Ulysses*, he champions "fixed or moving mechanical fragments, projected at a heightened speed that is appropriate to the state of simultaneity," mechanical interventions that have the power of "making images seen." Far from imposing a veil between the eye and the object world and substituting image for reality, the defamiliarizing experience of film has the potential to intensify a viewer's grasp of the real: "The mere fact of projection of the image already defines the object, which becomes spectacle" (22).

Bloom's and Stephen's visual experiences in *Ulysses* illustrate Leger's contention that constructed appeals to the eye reformulate one's processes of perception in daily life through what Walter Benjamin would later term an "unconscious optics" (*Illuminations* 237). This new way of apprehending the world, in Benjamin's view, was induced primarily by the camera – the end product of a century-long process during which technology had changed "the mode of human sense perception" (222). For Debord, the assault of mechanically reproduced images created a society in which "the spectacle make[s] us see the world by means of various specialized mediations," a widespread condition in which "the spectator's consciousness [is] imprisoned in a flattened universe, bounded by the screen of the spectacle behind which life has departed" (18, 218). Anticipating Debord, Benjamin laments the "thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment" that has made the "sight of immediate reality . . . an orchid in the