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book review of

*Georges Seurat: The Art of Vision* by Michelle Foa

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Michelle Foa,
*Georges Seurat: The Art of Vision.*
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Despite what seems at first glance to be a well-rehearsed topic, in this book Michelle Foa manages to offer a more complete understanding of Seurat’s oeuvre as a whole, from his series of seascapes to his large-scale figural paintings, as well as of the “model(s) of vision” that informed it (1). She demonstrates that the artist's understanding and representation of vision was itself fuller than has previously been explored: it transcended pointillism and color theory—the focus of much of the scholarship on Seurat and Neo-Impressionism—to encompass what might be termed a phenomenological model of vision (though this is not a term used by Foa, who largely employs the vocabulary of her period sources). As its title suggests, the overarching framework of the book is the Neo-Impressionist artist's exploration of vision, whether as a way of knowing the world, or as a means of foregoing that knowledge.

In chapter one, “Seeing in Series,” Foa examines the series of seascapes Seurat painted almost every summer (from 1885 until his death in 1891) at a different seaside town in northern France. She demonstrates that these series can only be understood as intentional ensembles of paintings in which Seurat, inspired by the work of Hermann von Helmholtz, sought to model the way that human beings make visual sense of their surroundings. The series share several features: human figures appear only infrequently, serving to highlight the experience of the artist/beholder at the expense of the sites’ socioeconomic life; the meeting of sea and sky at the horizon line plays a central role in each work; the paintings in each series offer different, interconnected vantage points without amounting to a continuous or complete survey of the site. For example, in the paintings of Honfleur, the artist depicted the same lighthouse and jetty from different distances and angles, yet the scale and placement of this motif within the composition results in sharply distinct views (14–15). Foa sees this registration of the artist’s movement throughout the site as a visualization of Helmholtz’s physiological conception of optics, in which binocular vision, movement through space, and other forms of embodied experience enable the brain to transform flat retinal images into impressions of depth and solidity. She convincingly argues that Seurat’s serial
practice was a means of reconstituting how we see in the world: as Helmholtz had noted, the flat, illusory worlds depicted on canvas could not replicate the experience of mobile vision in space, so Seurat makes up for this discrepancy by providing multiple views that suggest the foundational elements of this embodied vision.

Foa sees in the deliberate construction of Seurat’s serial views a foregrounding of “the cognitive aspect of visual perception” and provides an illuminating contrast in the work and thought of Claude Monet (27). The latter was creating his own series in this period, working with an increasingly limited number of variables (largely time of day, season, and atmospheric conditions) in an ongoing attempt to capture the immediacy and flux of visual experience via “spatial and temporal cuts” (29). Though these series were perhaps a response to the same critiques of Impressionism—as an art that produced visual and aesthetic fragments, or morceaux—that Foa sees as motivating Seurat, she argues that Monet’s response was to seek an “aesthetic totality” rather than a fuller understanding of his subjects. In seizing upon the instantaneous, shifting visual character of his motifs, Monet aspired to a “naïve” form of sight that could see without understanding (30). Foa contrasts this “pre- or even anti-cognitive . . . spectatorial” practice with the corporeal and cognitive engagement displayed in Seurat’s series (31, 33). If Monet was satisfied with the multiplication of the fragmentary morceau, Seurat was searching for an alternative unity to that found in the post-Renaissance, academic tradition of the single, large-scale tableau. The rest of the chapter is primarily devoted to a discussion of the possible role of panoramas and dioramas in influencing Seurat’s awareness and conception of vision, as well as to an explanation of the way in which the frequent depiction of tools of maritime navigation serve to reinforce Seurat’s theme of visual/spatial orientation in his seascapes. Though these connections are far from implausible, they are not as direct and compelling as Foa’s exegesis of Seurat’s representation of embodied, visual knowledge.

In chapter two, “Figuring out Vision,” Foa examines Seurat’s A Sunday on the Grande Jatte—1884 (1884–86) and Les Poseuses (1886–88) as explorations of an entirely different model of vision: the abstract, idealized, rational vision associated with the tableau, and epitomized by unified, complete scenes constructed according to linear perspective. Foa argues that Seurat was not simply replicating the conventions of the tableau, but was instead analyzing and ultimately challenging these conventions. She returns to nineteenth-century science’s reconceptualization of vision to elucidate this approach, first by highlighting the way the artist’s construction of the Grande Jatte reflects the contrast drawn by Helmholtz between the experience of seeing in the world and the experience of seeing the world in a painting. If the latter were to provide any sense of space and depth, Helmholtz explained, it could do so only by presenting a monocular, stationary view: the binocular disparity and movement that came with embodied vision could only highlight a painting’s flatness, rupturing the illusion of a window onto the world. Artists could nevertheless remediate this lack by providing various perceptual cues (termed “signs” by Helmholtz) of depth and solidity, such as linear perspective, the placement of recognizable figures and objects receding, at regular intervals, into the depicted space, the overlapping of figures, or by painting large-scale artworks in order to encourage the viewer to contemplate them from a greater distance (at which point the flatness perceived by binocular vision is less apparent). Seurat employs all of these strategies in the Grande Jatte, yet also includes a number of features that undermine the “tableau’s ideal of full, instantaneous intelligibility” (76): the tension between the spatial recession of the painting’s linear perspective and the lateral pull of its composition (created,
for example, by the leftward orientation of most of the figures and placement of the Seine); the insistent flatness and largely frontal or profile views of the figures, as well as their demarcation from the landscape; the inclusion of forms and figures that are cut off by the painting’s edge or difficult (and sometimes nearly impossible) to discern. The existence of paintings that display other related views of the Grande Jatte (A Bathing Place, Asnières and The Seine at Courbevoie of 1884 and 1885), and which were sometimes exhibited alongside it, also serve to suggest the partial, limited view provided by a single tableau.

Foa then turns to Seurat’s pointillism and Les Poseuses, which she sees as the first of Seurat’s works to be fully planned and executed using this technique—this fact, along with the painting's self-conscious referentiality to representation and to the artist’s oeuvre, renders it a work that “takes the physiological grounds of vision as its central focus” (87). Reviewing the foundations of the Neo-Impressionists’ pointillism, Foa discusses the role of Ogden Rood and Michel-Eugène Chevreul’s work on color in the artists’ rejection of “subtractive mixing” (the literal mixture of pigments) for “additive mixing” (in which pure pigments are juxtaposed, supposedly resulting in their optical mixture in the viewer’s eye), as well as their orchestration of color relationships. Foa once again delves into Helmholtz’s work to further elucidate Seurat’s artistic practice. Helmholtz held that certain color effects (those of successive contrast) were produced by the strong light and intensely saturated color only found in real-world viewing; a painter thus needed to introduce these “subjective phenomena” into the canvas in order to approximate the experience of viewing the actual scenes depicted in the painting. This advice helps to explain the Neo-Impressionist inclusion of some color effects (those of simultaneous and successive contrast) in their canvases despite the fact that these were optical effects of the eye rather than properties of the objects themselves. Alongside Seurat’s questioning of traditional illusionistic techniques, therefore, he was also “devising new illusionistic strategies grounded in the nineteenth-century science of vision” (91).

Yet Foa, following Meyer Schapiro, finds that Seurat and the viewer are not made dupes of this new form of illusionism: “by systematically breaking down and then reconstructing our perceptual experiences of the world around us in his pictures, Seurat renders perception itself visible to the viewer and makes the subjects of these pictures, at least in part, our perceptual processes and mechanisms” (91–92). Despite Foa’s emphasis on Seurat’s search for a more truthful depiction of what he saw, in her account the artist is still very much a modernist (though this term is not used), revealing rather than eliding the means of representation. At one point, Foa highlights Clement Greenberg’s assertion that Seurat was “the first to attack the concept of the easel painting as a window” (105). Greenberg was referring to Seurat’s practice of painted frames and borders, and it is in this practice, as well as in Les Poseuses, that Foa sees epitomized the artist’s modernist awareness of representation as representation.[1] Most obviously, Les Poseuses contains several paintings within the painting: within its shallow represented space, a corner of Seurat’s studio, the artist’s Grande Jatte takes up an entire wall but is abruptly cut off by the actual painting’s edge; on the other wall, a set of smaller paintings that Foa associates with Seurat’s serial practice are displayed as a coherent group. The depicted women also provide a meta-discourse on the illusion presented within the frame. They recall several art historical precedents, whether various depictions of the Three Graces or Ingres’s celebrated nudes, and their multiplication disavows the tableau’s illusion of a unified moment in time; instead, the similarity of the three figures implies that we are seeing distinct posing sessions with the
same model. *Les Poseuses* also possesses a painted border, which Foa argues functions both as a *repoussoir* (as noted by Matisse), "throwing other parts of the composition back into fictional depth" and as the flattening, illusion-breaking element described by Greenberg (105). Thus, while the seascapes discussed in the first chapter represent Seurat’s attempt, in Emile Verhaeren’s words, to "translate the world around him ‘as exactly as possible’," the large-scale figural compositions of the *Grande Jatte* and, especially, *Les Poseuses*, are conscious meditations on pictorial seeing (100).

In the third chapter, "Seductive Sights," Foa focuses on a set of paintings distinct from those discussed in the previous chapters, thanks to their preoccupation with popular entertainment, advertising imagery, and the "spectatorial mode of experience" that both entailed (121). Engaging once again with the work of Helmholtz, Foa highlights the scientist’s distinction between a sensory engagement with the world that, in a way analogous to scientific experimentation, yields new understanding, and "purely passive observations" that result in nothing more than "an ‘unintelligible phantasmagoria’" (122). She sees in the emphatic anti-naturalism and visual ambiguity of *Parade de Cirque* (1887–88), *Young Woman Powdering Herself* (1889–90), *Chahut* (1889–90) and *Circus* (1890–91) the visualization of the way in which the consumption of the depicted spectacles (or, in the case of *Young Woman*, of the advertisements it obliquely invokes) led to precisely the kind of passive, spectatorial phantasmagoria described by Helmholtz. The chief strength of this chapter is its articulation of these paintings as a coherent facet of Seurat’s oeuvre that must be reinterpreted through the lens of Foa’s earlier analyses: "When all of these works [the seascapes and the figural works examined in chapter two] are considered in relation to his late figural paintings of entertainments, one sees that Seurat’s painted oeuvre is organized, at least in part, around the juxtaposition of productive sensory, cognitive and corporeal interaction with the objects and spaces around one and a passive consumption of amusements in which vision functions to seduce or entrance the subject" (123). Foa also engages in intriguing examinations of *Parade*, *Young Woman* and *Circus*, highlighting in particular the way self-reflexive elements—whether *Parade’s* division between suggestions of painting as an illusionistic window and painting as flat, material object, or *Circus*’s multiple framing devices—leave open the potential for a less enthralled form of spectatorship. Yet Foa’s analysis of *Chahut* is more cursory, as is her treatment of Seurat’s interest in Charles Henry’s psychophysical aesthetics of color and line; we are merely told that they were involved in the artist’s increasing rejection of "conventional illusionism" and his exploration of "the ways that pictures might arouse the emotion of their spectators" (145). Though Henry’s impact on Seurat has been examined at length elsewhere in the scholarship, it would have been helpful to have a more in-depth discussion of how his psychophysical aesthetics intersected with the models of vision examined by Foa.[2] Similarly, her assertion that Seurat did not simply condemn the spectatorial mode of viewing, but instead engaged in a more equivocal exploration of its anti-rational, hallucinatory pleasures, is never fully taken up in her discussion of the artworks. It is a pity that this is the case, because Seurat’s stance on this nascent culture of mass spectacle and advertising is an unresolved question in the scholarship on the artist. To name just a few examples, Martha Ward held that Seurat’s exploration of the potential of psychophysical aesthetics in *Chahut* was absent of critical reflection as to its consequences; Howard Lay portrayed the pointillist surfaces and exaggerated forms of that same painting as a mediating filter that encouraged the viewer to maintain a critical perspective on spectacle; and Paul Smith has read the same features in Seurat’s depictions of entertainment as assertions of art’s capacity to construct a
transcendent harmony out of the most seemingly ignominious spectacle.[3] Jonathan Crary, for his part, has identified in Parade and its depicted spectacle an unresolved tension between the viewer’s subjugation and freedom (“between the idea of a synthesis that is externally controlled and imposed on a subject [...] and syntheses that are the free subjective invention of an active autonomous subject”).[4] Foa’s emphasis on Seurat’s interest in both the passivity and pleasure of spectatorial viewing suggests a dialectical synthesis of these viewpoints that is nevertheless unrealized in the chapter.

Chapter four, “Sight and Touch in Black and White,” focuses on Seurat’s drawings as an extension of his concern with “the conditions and limits of perception,” albeit with a greater emphasis on the role of tactility (158). The intimate scale, vantage point, and apparent location of many of these drawings, as well as their soft, irregularly textured facture, contradict Paul Signac and Félix Fénéon’s emphasis on Neo-Impressionism’s “dematerialized, decorporealized opticality” (161). Foa highlights Seurat’s predilection for close views “of a solitary figure engrossed in everyday acts that entail the cooperation of the sitter’s visual, tactile and cognitive capacities,” suggesting that these works propose attentive manual labor as a means of knowing analogous to Seurat’s visual navigation of the seascapes, and, indeed, to the close, careful looking that resulted in the drawings themselves (169). Yet these intimate views are complemented by others that reflect the spectatorial mode of vision Foa associates with Seurat’s entertainment paintings: drawings that depict darkened, anonymous audiences passively consuming brightly-lit performers. Foa concludes that Seurat saw intimate moments and spaces as the site of productive meaning-making, while those associated with collective, public reception are marked with passivity, artifice, and a lack of social interaction.[5]

Foa ends the book with an epigraph inspired by Seurat’s 1889 Eiffel Tower, which she highlights as an ambiguous symbol encompassing the various models of vision explored by the artist. On the one hand, the tower was analogous to the lighthouses featured in Seurat’s seascapes, “embod[y]ing a notion of light and sight as serving to enhance one’s knowledge about one’s environment” (203): it was used for optical signaling and telegraphy, and as a beacon illuminating its surroundings; it served both as a visual point of reference and as a site for surveying the city. On the other hand, the view from the tower, detached from the corporeal engagement characteristic of the seascapes, was for most visitors as much a matter of “sheer entertainment” as the circus and dance hall spectacles discussed in chapter three (203). The tower, whether the actual metal structure or Seurat’s painted representation, thus serves as a harbinger of a wider shift from edification to pleasure in art and life.

As I noted in the beginning of this review, Foa’s Georges Seurat: An Art of Vision is an illuminating reexamination of Seurat’s oeuvre, above all in terms of the justice it renders to the simultaneously physiological and cognitive character of Seurat’s embodied model of vision. In doing so, Foa joins scholars such as Crary, Smith, and Robert Hughes in highlighting modernist artists’ exploration not just of what they saw, but of vision itself.[6] I would have appreciated an explicit discussion of the wider historical factors, beyond the existence of new scientific models, underpinning this desire to examine vision. Though Foa insists upon Seurat’s distancing of socioeconomic concerns for epistemological ones, surely the former had a role in the latter?[7] But this caveat, like those presented with regards to
chapter three, does little to diminish the overall achievements of this thoroughly researched and lucidly argued book.

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Notes

[1] Foa suggests that Seurat began to elaborate this new practice of painted frames and borders around the same time he was working on *Les Poseuses* (102–4).


[5] Foa thus rejects, though only implicitly, Paul Smith’s conception of Seurat’s performers as inviting the viewer to “the higher ‘life’ of artistic ‘creation.’” *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*, 132.


[7] Despite the social commentary implicit in Seurat’s juxtaposition of engaged and passive forms of vision, Foa suggests that he was largely disinterested in the socioeconomic concerns that have animated so much of the scholarship on the artist (14, 85). Her focus on reconstructing Seurat’s point of view means that she cites, but never engages with, this scholarship.