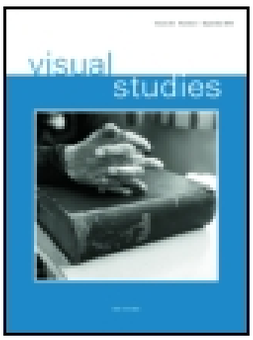

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Women's views: the narrative stereograph in nineteenth-century America

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Review

Women's views: the narrative stereograph in nineteenth-century America
by Melody Davis
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Reviewed by Artemis Alexiou, York St John University, UK

The stereoview encouraged 'a simulation of the eyes' natural process of reading depth' called stereopsis; stereoscopic vision represented both 'a sense of acute actuality and an inescapable awareness of subjective processes' (1, 3). Stereographs, Melody Davis argues, were part of the Victorian family unit and its self-presentation, successfully merging private and public together, two elements that ought to be examined side by side (5). *Women's Views* considers social themes, such as gender, capital, sexuality, and the way the notional boundaries of these themes are vulnerable to a continuous reshuffling (1). More specifically, the book examines four different genres of stereoviews, with the help of various theoretical frameworks, though always from the perspective that their marketing was addressed to home and family, consistently communicating messages to women's lives and appealing to their values (5). Davis argues that the stereoview cannot exist in 'a theoretical vacuum', and it certainly cannot be 'divorced from its uses nor its practices', especially because through the in-depth observation of stereographic practices one can discover subjects that are worthy of attention, and ought to be read in relation to social history (20).

In recent years, there has been a proliferation in research focusing on stereography, which has added credibility to the field, and gradually pushed aside the defensiveness that 'haunted vernacular subject matter and at times prevented its unbiased reception' (14). The author builds on new research, but also offers a thorough critique of Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* (1990) in an attempt to overthrow the perfunctory falsifications of stereography that have historically reigned the field (ibid.). Another important element of this work is its attention to the stereograph from a perspective that concentrates on women's experiences, emphasising their own position within social history. *Women's Views* is also unique in its methodological approach, because it offers technological, philosophical, and socio-historical insights. The information provided about the various technological aspects of the stereograph are invaluable for those interested in the history of vernacular methods of image production, whilst the detailed accounts about Lacanian and other concepts offer a fresh viewpoint on established ideas that are rarely challenged. Additionally, the author draws from reader-response and consumer theories to discuss women's reading and viewing as a gender-specific activity, as well as offering in-depth analyses of specific types of stereoviews – both of which allow the reader to construct a much more accurate idea of women's role in American social history.

The book is divided in two parts. Firstly, the author focuses on Oliver Wendell Holmes' concept of 'stereo-embodiment as an analogue for the somatic-intellectual development of a new sort of man' (28). Then, she turns her attention to Jacques Lacan's concept of 'the return volley of the gaze', as well as Bishop George Berkeley, and Luce Irigaray (Chapter 2). The book continues with a discussion on the manner in which stereography reflects the space of its own consumption (Chapter 3). Next, the focus moves to the market of stereography and its primarily female audience (Chapter 4), arguing that 'it is hard to find a medium with universal appeal that so unfailingly depicts women in its advertising as does stereography' (62). The second part presents four different genres of stereoviews: views of children (Chapter 5); views of marriage scenes (Chapter 6); views depicting eroticism (Chapter 7); and views of New Women and/or older bachelor men (Chapter 8). More specifically, 'Kids in View' argues that children were 'essential to demonstrating both the necessity and the effectiveness of the women's sphere', whilst at the same time 'the battle for the mother's exclusive control of the children' allowed an expansion of women's power (87). Moving on from the child to the whole family, 'Marriage Views' argues that 'the stereoview produced a fantasy emblem book', allowing viewers to 'recognize the standards for middle-class aspirations, modern romance, and the expectations of family life' (116). 'Erotic Views' focuses on the female body, arguing that in parallel to the 'specularization of

the female body in nineteenth-century stereoviews' there were many other 'voices that were not singing in unison' (145). Historians should not approach desire and the gaze from 'a unilateral conception', Davis explains, because this is problematic, multivalent, and undetermined (ibid.). Lastly, 'Gender Bunglers' focuses on those characters that could 'form nonthreatening resistance points within the very institution in which they appeared', allowing them to offer 'an extension of imaginative possibilities and covert critiques by simple contrast' (174). The section pays particular attention to the married New Woman, demonstrating how she succeeded in performing as a satirical, as well as fascinating, attractive, decisive character, whilst her 'bungling husband' is the hopeless other half (ibid.).

As mentioned above, *Women's Views* offers an impressive amalgamation of technological, philosophical and socio-historical material; however, the manner in that these various elements have been organised and presented is not always effective. For example, the introduction begins with a discussion about a comic strip, and then moves on to a lengthy explanation on how to use the stereoviewer provided with the book. Both elements seem to injure the momentum, because they focus on information that, one might argue, is not as exciting as the main gist of this book, which was probably what attracted readers in the first place. Furthermore, Part One feels as if it is the starter before the main meal; though rewarding, it does not offer analyses of stereoviews, as such, in the way that Part Two does. In other words, the reader has to hike through four lengthy, heavily typed chapters before they can be allowed to have the main meal. Providing instructions on how to read the chapters also feels a little too restrictive. Nevertheless, this book undoubtedly presents an important contribution primarily to the history of photography, and also to American women's history. It is absolutely evident that the author has devoted a lot of time and effort in this work, not only to challenge already established biased ideas about stereography, but also to offer a history of the stereograph that acknowledges the central role of women.

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