



Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture (October Books)

Jonathan Crary

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Suspensions of Perception is a major historical study of human attention and its volatile role in modern Western culture. It argues that the ways in which we intently look at or listen to anything result from crucial changes in the nature of perception that can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century.

Focusing on the period from about 1880 to 1905, Jonathan Crary examines the connections between the modernization of subjectivity and the dramatic expansion and industrialization of visual/auditory culture. At the core of his project is the paradoxical nature of modern attention, which was both a fundamental condition of individual freedom, creativity, and experience and a central element in the efficient functioning of economic and disciplinary institutions as well as the emerging spaces of mass consumption and spectacle.

Crary approaches these issues through multiple analyses of single works by three key modernist painters -- Manet, Seurat, and Cezanne -- who each engaged in a singular confrontation with the disruptions, vacancies, and rifts within a perceptual field. Each in his own way discovered that sustained attentiveness, rather than fixing or securing the world, led to perceptual disintegration and loss of presence, and each used this discovery as the basis for a reinvention of representational practices.

Suspensions of Perception decisively relocates the problem of aesthetic contemplation within a broader collective encounter with the unstable nature of perception -- in psychology, philosophy, neurology, early cinema, and photography. In doing so, it provides a historical framework for understanding the current social crisis of attention amid the accelerating metamorphoses of our contemporary technological culture.

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