

Anne Anderson, Sibylle Erle, Laurie Garrison, Verity Hunt, Phoebe Putnam and Peter West, eds., *Panoramas, 1787-1900: Texts and Contexts*. 6 vols. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013. Pp. 2,000. £450. ISBN 9781848930155.

When the Irish-born portrait artist Robert Barker opened the first Panorama in Edinburgh in 1787 he described himself in the publicity for his exhibition not only as the inventor of a new form of entertainment but as a daring artistic innovator whose work marked ‘AN IMPROVEMENT ON PAINTING, Which relieves that sublime Art from a Restraint it has ever laboured under’. What distinguished Barker’s invention – a vast, 360° canvas housed in a purpose-built enclosure – from established forms of illusionistic perspective painting was the apparent eradication of anything beyond the image that would allow the eye to re-establish a sense of the distinction between painted surface and reality. By preventing viewers from getting too close to the canvas, and by flooding the enclosure with daylight while, at the same time, concealing its source, viewers were tricked into thinking that the scene before them was real. Anecdotes abound of credulous responses to Barker’s displays: Queen Charlotte was reportedly seasick while viewing ‘The Grand Fleet at Spithead in 1791’; the Duke of Wellington was said to have become over-excited as he strained to get a closer view of the panorama of Sabraon. In addition to serving as testimony to the illusion’s success, stories such as these point to the inherent contradictoriness of the medium: on the one hand the Panorama was presented as a form of popular immersive entertainment – audiences were attracted by promises of spectacle and scale – on the other it was regarded as an object of connoisseurship, ‘intended chiefly’, in Barker’s words, ‘for the criticism of artists, and admirers of painting in general’.

Such contradictions extend to the origins of the Panorama. In one influential account Barker is said to have come up with the idea of a large, continuous circular painting whilst surveying the view from Calton Hill in Edinburgh: this form of painting would enable observers to feel as if they were witnessing reality rather than a mere reproduction of the original scene. In another version, Barker gained an insight into the ability of stark contrasts of light and shade to create illusionistic effects whilst imprisoned for debt in a round cell with an aperture in the middle of the ceiling. In the first account the genesis of panoramic seeing is related to liberty and expansiveness; in the second, it is shown to be dependent on restriction and confinement. Subsequent commentators, mindful of the Foucaultian reading of Bentham’s contemporaneous design for the Panopticon, have made much of the tensions and the connections between these two accounts. It is no small irony that the Panorama, in its endeavour to go beyond the limits of painting, ended up positioning its viewers as docile, disciplinary subjects as a condition of its promise of unfettered access to the wonders of the world.

As evidenced by the wealth of annotated keys and narrative programmes reproduced in *Panoramas: Texts and Contexts, 1787-1900*, the enormous popularity of the medium throughout the nineteenth century was buoyed along, in large measure, by serial depictions of military triumphs and colonial territories, providing further evidence of the Panorama’s role as an enforcer of the dominant ideology. Although some critics have argued that the relatively low cost of admission to the Panorama helped to blur distinctions between classes, enabling ordinary people to participate in the ennobling pursuit of grand vistas and allowing them to comment on Britain’s martial and imperial accomplishments in a way that would not have been possible in the previous century, the fact remains that the all-encompassing vision or ‘nature at a glance’, as Barker’s patent specified, laid great store in preventing observers

from 'going too near the painting' in order to maintain illusionistic and, by extension, ideological consistency.

As the editors of these volumes attest, a lack of relevant documentation makes it all but impossible to reconstruct a detailed reception history for the Panorama. For anyone conducting research into this pervasive and highly successful medium the absence of individual accounts of contemporary displays is both baffling and frustrating. Apart from newspaper advertisements and a scant number of preparatory sketches (hardly any complete canvases survive) all that seems to remain to testify to the existence of the Panorama phenomenon are collections of narrative programmes and annotated keys. *Panoramas* reproduces a considerable number of printed materials, reflective not only of the well-known late eighteenth and early-nineteenth century British context but also of the burgeoning American scene of the second half of the century; from these materials we can at least gain an impression of the form these displays took and the means by which audiences were guided, both textually and visually, to interpret the views before them.

Aside from scattered comments by Reynolds, Constable, Ruskin and Turner, it is Wordsworth's *Prelude* that provides one of the few sustained evaluations of the Panorama. During his stays in London in the 1790s Wordsworth may have visited Barker's views of Calton Hill, Albion Mills and the grand fleet lying at Spithead. Although the poet does not specify which of these shows he witnessed his allusion in book 7 of the *Prelude* to the painter 'fashioning a work / To Nature's circumambient scenery, / And with his greedy pencil taking in / A whole horizon on all sides' makes explicit a prevailing unease with the rise of visual technology and the commodification of the romantic sublime strong enough to bely the poem's concluding insistence on the transcendence of mere material sight.

What remains to be examined in this fascinating and increasingly relevant field of enquiry are the precise ways in which panorama displays were related to concurrent developments in the technologies of warfare, in the management of colonies, in the dissemination of knowledge and in the fashioning of the self. While key works by Richard Altick (1978), Ralph Hyde (1988), Stephen Oettermann (1997) and Bernard Comment (1999) have provided first-rate general discussions of the medium, and while literary and cultural studies of romantic visuality by, most notably, William Galperin (1993), Gillen D'Arcy Wood (2003) and Sophie Thomas (2008), have pointed to the connections between panoramic painting and the visionary ambitions of high romantic poetry, with the exception of Denise Blake Oleksijczuk's *The First Panorama: Visions of British Imperialism* (2011) detailed analyses of how individual displays were presented 'in the midst of a pertinent cultural, political or imperial context' have yet to appear. The 'raw materials' contained in the six volumes of this edition, together with the wide-ranging and informative headnotes and section introductions, will undoubtedly inspire researchers to continue this valuable work.

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