

Stuart Clark. *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xi + 415 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$40. ISBN: 978-0-19-925013-4.

Stuart Clark's book constitutes an impressive and authoritative contribution to the cultural history of sight that will provide a substantial resource for scholars working in a number of fields. Spanning a broad range of sources that includes scientific optics, philosophy, theology, anatomy, art history, and literature, Clark attacks the view that the visual culture of post-Renaissance Europe was based upon a rationalized conception of visual perception. Clark posits a number of concurrent intellectual developments that undermined the idea that the eye offered direct and accurate access to external reality, and that suggest instead "the modern sounding notion that human subjects 'make' the objects they perceive, fashioning them out of the qualities that belong intrinsically to perception, not to the objects themselves" (4).

To substantiate this argument, Clark surveys the history of the understanding of the physical mechanisms of vision. In addition, however, he also gives substantial attention to changing conceptions of the role of the mind in the processing of perceived images, and by extension to the function of mental representations in cognition. He therefore considers how the range of visual anomalies and illusions that brought the veridical value of the eye into question during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was not limited to external optical tricks like reflection and refraction, but also included those visual disruptions that took place within the brain. Such mental disturbances were widely believed to cause images that originated within the mind to take on the appearance of external, objective reality, and Clark gives particular attention to the phenomena of optical delusions caused by melancholia — an association that he demonstrates to have been widespread among early modern thinkers. Alongside these psychological effects, however, unreliable visual perceptions might also derive from the interference of malign spirits, and drawing upon the interest in demonology pursued in his previous work *Thinking with Demons* (1999), Clark gives a vivid account of the ways in which spirits were believed to intervene in human sense perception.

Vanities of the Eye reappraises the ways in which early modern culture fashioned the experience of the visual world. What results, however, is something larger: a new insight into the early modern conception of the individual, into the texture of perceptual experience and the unstable possibility of objective truth. It is particularly valuable to find meticulously researched resources for examining the corporeal, intellectual, and spiritual condition of the early modern individual considered together — as they would have been for the subjects of this study, and as they are so rarely represented in contemporary scholarship — and the relationship between perception, imagination, cognition, and memory emerges significantly refreshed.

Clark's book represents a considerable step forward in the history of sight, offering a welcome addition to the work of cultural historians such as Martin Jay, who, in taking a long view, have tended to homogenize the conflicting impulses and opposing values that attended visual perception in the centuries during and after the Renaissance. Clark goes further, however, in demonstrating the extent to which the project of visual history, conceived as it is here in its broadest terms, is of value to many other scholarly disciplines. The history of physical images can be linked to the history of cognition through this kind of careful and expansive work, and it is research that shows the emerging field of visual culture at its best — taking visual and verbal sources together, and giving equal weight to images that exist within and beyond the mind. Clark's book is a powerful argument that any scholar who has an interest in images and image making, in their production and circulation, must give attention to the nature of vision itself, and to the many interlocking factors that determine its cultural construction.

JANE PARTNER
Trinity Hall, Cambridge