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Through the Looking Glass: Territories of the Historiographic Gaze

This essay introduces the subject/object juxtapositions inherent in the writing of history. By comparing these “perspectives” with subject/object positions in the visual arts it will present not only a background to current historiographic models, but will also suggest ways to extend beyond traditional historical method.

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Visible Language, 28:3
Anne Bush, 219-231

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I reflected that everything, to everyone, happens precisely, precisely now. Century after century, and only in the present, do things happen. There are innumerable men in the air, on land and on sea, and everything that happens, happens to me.

Jorge Luis Borges, *The Garden of Forking Paths*

In 1822, Hegel proclaimed that all history is the history of thought. As part of his famous lectures on the philosophy of history, Hegel distinguished the past, or actual events, from history, or human *reflection* upon those events.¹ According to Hegel, our knowledge of all previous actions, whether human or natural, is based on the extrinsic manifestation of our *conception* of those actions. It is a view from a distanced position, an interpretation from a separate temporal and spatial moment. With this said, it follows that historiography, or the writing of history, cannot be an *objective* documentation of human or natural actions per se, but can only be a perspective, the *subjective* interpretation of those actions. It is a representation composed in the present, an articulation of an object conceived by the cognitive, subjective gaze. Thus, verbal histories bear a close affinity with the visual realm. Both verbal and visual perspectives encompass a tripartite structure that includes the object being “observed,” as well as the method of observation and the ways in which the “observer” *subjectively* alters it.

Following the model of nineteenth-century art historiography, histories of graphic design have traditionally been object-centered, focused on aesthetic or contextual analyses of the designed product. This perception is narrow at best. Recent theoretical discussions have extended design “beyond the object,” into the dimensions of both action and ideology.² If the purpose of historical investigation is self-knowledge, then we must not fall prey to the fallacy of *objective* evaluation. All representations are subjective constructions.

Attention to these points of view, or the privileging of sight, has been described by the historian Martin Jay as a singularly Modern phenomenon. In his essay, “Scopic Regimes of

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Hegel, G.F. 1956. *The Philosophy of History*. New York: Dover, 8-9.

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For further discussions of this topic see: Baudrillard, Jean. 1981. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St. Louis: Telos Press, and 1983. “The Ecstasy of Communication” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture*. Hal Foster, ed. Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 126-134. Also see: Thackara, John. 1988. “Beyond the Object” in *Design After Modernism*. London: Thames and Hudson, 11-34.

Modernity"; Jay defines three visual "modes" — Renaissance linear perspective, seventeenth-century Dutch observational perspective and Baroque reciprocal perspective — that have significantly effected the way we understand the world.³ By highlighting these subject/object positions in the visual arts, he presents a conceptual scaffolding around which I will build relations between visual and verbal perspectives of history.

The External Gaze

The narrative view of history as storytelling is inexorably linked to humanism. If the Christian world privileged the divine "eye," then the secular world championed the human eye as the controlling subject. This conception, which permeated fifteenth-century intellectual discussions, became visually manifest with the introduction of linear perspective.

Discovered by Brunelleschi, the theoretical attributes of linear perspective were first outlined in Alberti's treatise, *De Pittura*. According to Alberti, the goal of perspective was to center the subject's vision at a critical point in the visual narrative, to draw the viewer into the scene, to fix his or her gaze.

*These instructions are of such a nature that [any painter] who really understands them will both by his intellect and by his comprehension of the definition of painting realize how useful they are. Never let it be supposed that anyone can be a good painter if he does not clearly understand what he is attempting to do. He draws the bow in vain who has nowhere to point the arrow.*⁴

Optically, linear perspective attempts to represent a three-dimensional world within a two-dimensional plane. As a geometric structure it consists of two cones which meet at the canvas surface in a diamond-shaped configuration. The apexes of these cones then extend in opposite directions; one to the controlling eye of the artist, the other into the painting. This juxtaposition, points to both the story being told and the painter who visually controls the narrative. Evident in Raphael's *Marriage of the Virgin*, the artist becomes Alberti's

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Jay, Martin. 1992. "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in *Modernity and Identity*. Scott Lash and Johnathan Friedman, editors. Oxford: Blackwell, 178-195. (First appeared in a shorter form in Foster, Hal ed., *Vision and Visuality*, 1988. Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press).

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Alberti, L.B. 1966. *On Painting*. J.R. Spencer, editor. New Haven: Yale University Press, 59. First published 1435-6.

archer. Here, Raphael constructed an unambiguous narrative where the viewer is led to both the central action of the wedding and, by way of the perspectival pathway, the open doorway in the building directly behind the ceremony. This visual link connects the foreground and background of the painting. It becomes a unified target for the visual marksman, a coherent, transparent window to which the viewer is drawn, yet physically separated by the canvas surface. Edged by a hypothetical frame, the canvas delineates a concrete boundary between reality and illusion, spectator and spectacle. Here a threshold is created, a *mise en scene*, a contained moment in which the observer is solely a voyeur. The world of the painting becomes a contained visual reality where all interaction is dictated by the artist's static and hegemonic eye.

As a complement to this visual supremacy, the dominant eye of linear perspective finds its philosophical counterpart in the cognitive "I" of René Descartes. In an effort to expand philosophical inquiry beyond meaningless conjecture, Descartes sought a methodology through which he could rationally test assumptions. Viewing reality as a mental construct, Descartes denounced all phenomena which could be questioned and championed a process of rational deduction. Identified primarily as a mathematician, Descartes believed that the only actuality which could not be doubted was the doubting self, hence his famous dictum; *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore, I am). He perceived all reality outside the doubting self as separate and detached, as "entities modeled on retinal images - representations which are in the mind."⁵ In keeping with linear perspective, the apex of the conceptual "cone" in the Cartesian model is now the human mind, the vantage from which the subject determines his or her environment. Paradoxically, this reasoning led Descartes to denounce history as a valid intellectual discipline. In his *Discourse on Method* he argued that suppositions about previous events are always subject to doubt and, as such, do not adhere to methods of rational inquiry.

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Rorty, Richard. 1979. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 45.

...even histories, true though they be, and neither exaggerating nor altering the value of things, omit circumstances of a meaner and less dignified kind in order to become more worthy of a reader's attention; hence the things which they describe never happened exactly as they describe them and men who try to model their own acts upon them are prone to the madness of romantic paladins and meditate hyperbolic deeds.⁶

Narrative historians, however, fully understand the futility of trying to recreate the past objectively. History to them is a rhetorical endeavor and they not only acknowledge but also utilize their subjective position as a historiographic device. As architects of historical representations, narrative historians understand the modes of rhetorical construction to which their audience will respond. Predominantly, these compositions are determined by factors outside history including social, cultural and ideological conventions. Thus, as Hayden White observes, narrative histories become, "symbolic structures, extended metaphors, that 'liken' the events reported in them to some form with which we have already become familiar."⁷ So conceived, history-as-storytelling directs the reader's perspective to the center of an illusory world. Like the Renaissance canvas, narrative history is not concerned with the *objective* documentation of human and natural actions, but with a *subjective*, monocentric conception of those actions relayed to us as a kind of fiction.

The External Gaze

In 1505, the French priest, Jean Pélerin outlined a conflicting visual mode. In *De Artificiali Perspectiva*, he described the mind not as an end point at which stimuli are consumed and interpreted, but as a mirror, an impartial reflection of the surrounding world. As such, the controlling eye of linear perspective is reduced to a passive corridor. It becomes the indiscriminating conduit of information, a tunnel to a mind where empirical knowledge is documented, stored and objectively reflected back to the natural world.⁸ A manifestation of this conception is evident in Dutch painting of the seventeenth century.

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Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method*. quoted in Collingwood, R.G. 1956. *The Idea of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 59.

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White, Hayden. 1978. "Historical Text as Literary Artifact," *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 91.

8

Brion-Guerry, 1962. *L. Jean Pélerin Viator: Sa Place dans l'Histoire de la Perspective*. Paris: Société d'Édition Les Belles Lettres, 219-220.

As an “art of observation,” Dutch painting unified real and representational worlds. Conceived as an empirical record of everyday life, the autonomy of the subjective eye was neutralized, and an ambiguous duality was created between the actual world of the viewer and the extended world of the artificial. In her book, *The Art of Describing*, Svetlana Alpers attributes this observational perspective to both a Dutch interest in the properties of light and a plethora of images in seventeenth-century Dutch society.

In Holland the visual culture was central to the life of the society. One might say that the eye [my emphasis] was a central means of self-expression and visual experience a central mode of self-consciousness.⁹

This self-representation, however, was austere and simplified, an attempt at an unadulterated documentation. “Dutch painting was not and could not be anything but a portrait of Holland, its external image, faithful, exact, complete, life-like, without any adornment,”¹⁰ a purity of observation that paralleled the Dutch purity of life. Dutch representation was neutral and focused on the direct analysis of details, replicating seventeenth-century perceptions of the natural world.

In making the correlation between the “art of description” and historiography, the key word is *natural*. As objective compilation, empirical or *positivist* historiography attempts to eschew all ideology in favor of scientific inquiry to create propositions that champion the natural. Akin to the textual criticism of classical philology, empirical history focuses on the close examination of evidence. This history is a search for authoritative data. Its purpose is not interpretive conjecture regarding authorial intention, but rather the legitimization of sources, an objective compilation of factual, valid research. In both the Dutch observational perspective and empirical historiography, judgment and conclusions are curtailed. The positivist’s purpose is to locate and examine singular moments, synthesize them without evaluation, and “reflect” them as neutral components existing *in the world*. In each case, the viewing subject is not relegated to a single position. He or she is only a notational element within an infinite diversity.

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Alpers, Svetlana. 1983. *The Art of Describing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, xxv. 1 2

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Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, xviii.

The Reflected Gaze

In the Baroque we find Jay's third and final visual "mode." Similar to the Dutch perspectival realm, the Baroque "eye" was anti-Cartesian, existing as part of a larger milieu. But unlike the "art of description," the Baroque point of view had no pretense to the neutral gaze, and in Baroque painting, the subject/object relationship was ambiguous. The purpose of Baroque painting was to seduce and amaze through extensive formal elaboration and mystical opacity. Contrary to the controlled or neutral objects of previous examples, the Baroque object "looked back" at the subjective eye, refusing to have meaning imposed upon it, rendering the exchange incomplete. Baroque subject/object relations represent a reciprocity that is kinetic and unpredictable. Thus, traditional notions of perspective are interrupted as the viewer is teased and aroused in a futile effort to reconcile the switching positions. As Michel Foucault noted in his essay on Velasquez's *Las Meninas*:

As soon as they place the spectator in the field of their gaze, the painter's eyes seize hold of him, force him to enter the picture, assign him a place at once privileged and inescapable, levy their luminous and visible tribute from him, and project it upon the inaccessible surface of the canvas within the picture. He sees his invisibility made visible to the painter and transposed into an image forever invisible to himself.¹¹

Indeed, it is this struggle for power, this unattainable presence in a nonexistent reality that has both plagued and propelled modern historiography. In his book *The Writing of History*, Michel de Certeau states that "historiography has arisen from the European encounter with the unknown other."¹² Whether the subject possessed the single eye of the narrative historian or the assumed objective eye of the empiricist, history in both cases was controlled by the unilateral quality of the subjective gaze.

Discursive historiography provides an alternative to this single perspective by emphasizing the relativity of historical moments. In a discursive analysis events are not privileged

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Foucault, Michel. 1973. *The Order of Things*. New York: Random House, 5.

12

De Certeau, Michel. 1988. *The Writing of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, vii.

as historical icons but rather as factors within a structural system of multifaceted relationships. The discursive framework not only includes the striated levels of its own construction, but also its meta-systemic intersection with other historical constellations. As Foucault has outlined, “discursive historiography is an ‘archeological investigation’ which exposes the combination of individual events, their determinants, and their respective intersections (divergent and convergent).”¹³ Like the Baroque, it serves to acknowledge, not reconcile, temporal and spatial ambiguity. “Discontinuity was the stigma of temporal dislocation that it was the historian’s task to remove from history. It has now become one of the basic elements of historical analysis.”¹⁴ It is the aim of discursive historiographers not to subjectively homogenize the past, but to describe the opacity of its construction, the intersection of concordances and contradictions. In discursive history, as in the art of the Baroque, the subjective gaze is inevitable. Yet, the observing eye is reflected back onto the historian, creating an infinite reciprocity of meaning. Thus, discursive accounts speak to both the multifarious conditions influencing historiographic perspective and the fallacious notion that history can ever be a fixed, quantifiable entity.

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Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon Books, 8.

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Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, 8.

Reflecting Histories of Graphic Design

As in other historical studies, the concept of containing graphic design’s past under a single rubric is futile. There is no *History* of graphic design, no single synthesis, no unified entity. To assume so relegates the study of the past to either a hegemonic simplification or a utopian belief in dialectical progress. Events in history are multi-faceted constructions. As such, their representations are complex and often the simplification of concepts masks, rather than extends, understanding. The reduction of graphic design histories to treatises that focus on a single informational product, such as an individual or a style ignores the greater milieu from which we garner knowledge. By the same token, the belief in cause and effect as an infinite conversion to a more refined end, is also fallacious. The catalogued sequence of eras, products or

schools of thought conceptually submits design production to the guise of progress. Dialectical progression, however, is an idealist vision that anticipates a final reconciliation, a “meeting of the minds,” framed by the historicist tendencies of the author.

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Foucault, 169.

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Foucault, 173.

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Foucault, 173.

Any notion of a defined framework runs the risk of lapsing into canonical prescription. As an indictment to the structuralist claim to a fixed, and thus true and observable meaning, post-structuralism reveals the heroic, subjective nature concealed in structuralist attempts to define and master historical signs. Discursive interpretations champion the ephemeral. They are merely descriptive “suspensions” within an infinitely kinetic network. By delineating temporary boundaries around historical convergences, the discursive historian excerpts particular moments for study that have no pretense to be absolute. Instead of uncovering the exemplary, discursivity only suggests possibilities, and in so doing, broadens our historical archive. This extension reveals both the various forms of chronology imposed on the writing of history as well as the outside forces and intrinsic methods which make these forms manifest. In addition, it exposes the multiple rates of transformation within a determined discursive configuration. Through this method, discursive analysis suspends the historical assumption that temporal notions of the past are linear and sequential.¹⁵

This suspension allows us to examine our presuppositions about historical movement in graphic design. It presents propositions that vary according to types of articulation and levels of emergence, and allows us to compare these momentary configurations with others that have previously been articulated. It is here that we discern the difference between questioning what change is and accepting it a priori.¹⁶ Issues to consider include not only how individual elements of a historical system were transformed, but also how different relations within that system were altered. To perform this analysis is to understand that alternative objects of study, articulations, concepts, etc. do not emerge fully manifest, but may represent particular hybrid forms.¹⁷ Thus, discourse is not static even though it is momentarily suspended. Outside this pause, levels of discursive articulation are realized in an infinitude of variation.

As an area of observation, suspended historical moments are established by drawing temporary boundaries and/or delimiting the external forces surrounding a particular practice.¹⁸ One of many examples, Marxist theory provides a well-known configuration that examines the limits imposed on cultural production by global capitalism. This process is both scorned and encouraged by conceptions of national identities and the effect of these conceptions on the products of visual communication. Hence, the field of study is established by comparing propositions and distinguishing them from others that are not necessarily part of the same time frame or acted upon by the same outside determinants. Through comparison, the historian searches for similarities and divergences of relations at the expense of the arbitrary *Zeitgeist*. Thus, discursive historiography is the search for theories of attribution, articulation and designation within a defined, historical network. What forces can be described as linked to the objects (artifact, act, value) of graphic design? How do they achieve their effects? In what ways are they identified (or ignored) by the graphic design profession? The goal of discursivity is not to present these border zones as an *absolute*, but to discuss them as one of many possible configurations.¹⁹ This is particularly important for histories of graphic design because its articulation is by definition interdisciplinary. All visual communication is inextricably linked to economics, industrial production and consumptive value as well as to ideological biases.

The histories of graphic design are examinations of arguments. This study, however, is not always a duality, an “either/or.” Discursive theories dictate that the object is multifaceted, and that it can be examined from several vantage points. Thus, historical propositions in graphic design can vary according to semantic categories imposed upon the object of study, as well as the different ways in which these classifications are formed.²⁰ These propositions can also differ according to various oppositional levels that pit part against whole, rigidity against freedom, the arbitrary against the concrete and inclusion against exclusion.²¹ The value of these binary sets lies in the inevitability of debate, the recognition that alternative avenues of investigation are unavoidable and that they widen our view of the past.

18
Foucault, Michel. 1972.
*The Archeology of
Knowledge*. New York:
Pantheon Books, 157-165.

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Foucault, *The Archeology
of Knowledge*. 158.

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Foucault, 149-156.

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Foucault, 154.

Thus, discursive contradictions in graphic design histories act both to combine and separate specific theses. This does not, however, neutralize them to a single whole or pluralism, but instead, maps intersections of thought – the relationships that both govern and exist between graphic design as an object, a value and an act.²²

It is important not to confuse these temporal emergences with the concept of origin. As Foucault has pointed out, the traditional historiographic search for a definable source was substantiated by the attribution of historic events to either “old” or “new” rubrics. The “old” was used as the stabilizing mode, the way in which historical elements hold together by virtue of what they had in common.²³ Such designations provided history with a foundation, a method through which to compare and legitimize the historical propositions in question with those that went before. This method is evident in chronologically ordered graphic design histories in which sources are attributed to particular schools or “masters,” technological developments and national origins. Opposing this nostalgic perspective is the legitimization of whatever the writer chooses to separate from this lineage. Thus, we have *die neue typographie*, *New American Design*, *The New Discourse*, etc., ad infinitum. As such, history becomes an eternal love affair with “novelty,” distinguishing the “better,” or separating truth from fiction. The paradox in this type of historical positioning is the assumption that it is possible to divide the two.

Concepts of reevaluation, reaction and discovery expose the fallacy of their separation. Thus, we understand their meaning *within* the shadow of the “other,” their perpetual “difference.”²⁴ This comprehension, however, does not imply a study of the old as the legitimizing precursor of the new, but as an evaluation of the relations that can be discerned at a definable moment. With this said, we can negate the temptation to make analogies based solely on lineage or resemblance on the one hand, and temporal improvement or progress on the other. Who or what defines the true order of events? For example, can it be claimed that *die neue typographie* preceded the *International Typographic Style* when the later quoted its

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Foucault, 155.

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Foucault, 141.

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For the roots of this discussion of “difference” or “différance” see Derrida, Jacques. 1976. “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” from *Of Grammatology*. 1977. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Also see Derrida, Jacques. 1968. “Difference” an address to the Société française de philosophie. Both are reprinted in Adams, Hazard and Searle, Leroy, eds. 1989. *Critical Theory Since 1965*. Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 83-136.

attributes, utilized its methods and modified its claims? Also, how do we *identify* likenesses between past and present? Surely, the Bauhaus does not hold exactly the same meaning for us today that it did for Pevsner.²⁵ Thus, we need to examine the conjuncture of meanings and implications, and not lapse into a false positioning relative to old or new configurations.

The Reflexive Gaze

Graphic designers possess particular affinities with the linear subjectivity of traditional historiography. During a large part of the twentieth century graphic designers willingly accepted the sequential, “transparent” qualities of the typographic message, the mandate of the “Crystal Goblet.”²⁶ It is not surprising then that we would find it difficult to separate from a subject-centered and progressive historiography. Current examinations of industrial capitalism, however, have thrown this acceptance into question. The historian Donald Lowe notes:

*Visual primacy and objective reason, supported by typographic culture, isolated certain perceived phenomena as cause and others as effect. The linear connection from cause to effect imposed a positive order on intersubjectivity. . . . However this linearity broke down in corporate capitalism. By the early twentieth century, correlative to the concentration and control of the leading industries by trusts and cartels, three altered relations characterized the multi-level structure of corporate capitalism, namely those between production and consumption, between economy and the state and between economic structure and ideology.*²⁷

The designed product as visual image or message, has no single referent. Instead, it is an organic structure, an alluvial connection relative to changing consumer positions, values and expectations. As such, the discipline of graphic design has become multiperspectival.

It is important not to confuse this diversity of vantage point with early modernist attempts to collapse time and space. Contrary to cubist or surrealist intentions to “disrupt” visual and conceptual “connections,” our current point of view

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See Pevsner, Nikolaus. 1960. *Pioneers of Modern Design*. New York: Penguin Books, 38-9.

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The concept of the “Crystal Goblet” was taken from the book of the same name by Beatrice Warde, particularly the opening essay, “Printing Should Be Invisible”. In this essay, she compares the printed page to a “flagon of wine,” a “crystal-clear glass, thin as a bubble and as transparent.”

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Lowe, David. 1982. *History of Bourgeois Perception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1.

concentrates on intersections, the places where events interrelate, transform and reposition our conventional interpretations. In historiography we are not just experimenting with juxtaposition or the destruction of traditional affinities, but rather the convergence and divergence of particular events, the actuality of their crossing and dispersal viewed from the present perspective.

In his book, *History of Bourgeois Perception*, Donald Lowe reaffirms Hegel's philosophical belief in the past as a present construction.²⁸ He proposes that our sense of this ongoing present is *prospective*, and reveals the relationship between the anticipatory vision that the past held for itself as a future construction and the ability of the historian to observe the actuality of that prospect. As such the representation of the past from a present perspective does not reduce to a pragmatic device for current ideological gains, but produces a reciprocal relationship between the prospective vision of a past reality and the historical representation of that vision by the historian.

Prospectivity within retrospection is the reflexivity of historical consciousness. Beyond the mere ascertaining of "facts" and "events," the historian will have to apprehend the prospective reality of a past, as well as locate it within an explanatory context undertaken from the vantage of the present. Not merely do we see the French Revolution from our present vantage point, but we need to show how the various groups of French people in 1789 saw their unfolding revolution, and in our explanation of it we should not reduce the significance of their experience.²⁹

It is within this reciprocity that we can understand the importance of shifting the unilateral viewpoint of subjective histories of graphic design to the reciprocity of discursive analysis. By suspending the temporal intersection of historical events, studying their multiple levels of convergences as well as their individual manifestations, and then re-presenting them from a present perspective, we divulge a plethora of observations and relationships, ones that reveal as much about ourselves as they do about the past. □

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Lowe, David. 1982. *History of Bourgeois Perception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 174.

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Lowe, *History of Bourgeois Perception*, 175.

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1847 Emily Hartwell writes
Height and Gravity
Eye California
1848 Marx and Engels publish
Communist Manifesto
rights convention in United States
Pre-Raphaelite Movement begins
1849 Amelia Bloomer fights to reform
women's clothes, her name becomes
associated with undergarment
1850 Nathaniel Hawthorne writes *The
Scarlet Letter*. Crystal Palace erected
in London. Schooner America wins
first America's Cup.
1851 Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* not
well received. Isaac Singer manufac-
tures first practical sewing machine.
1852 Harriet Beecher Stowe writes
Uncle Tom's Cabin.
1854 Thoreau writes *Walden*.
1855 Walt Whitman writes *Leaves of
Grass*.
1856 Gustave Flaubert publishes
Madame Bovary.
1857 Elisha Gray's Otis installs first
safety elevator.
1859 Charles Darwin publishes *Origin
of Species*. First GI well drilled in
oil-bearing Charles Blandin crosses
the Atlantic on ship.
1861 American Civil War begins. U.S.
announces second 12 million
soldiers. Declaration trees
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