Panoramic Visions: Denise Blake Oleksijczuk, The First Panoramas; Erkki Huhtamo, Illusions in Motion

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(Review)

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In 1788, Robert Barker exhibited his View of Edinburgh and the Surrounding Country from the Calton Hill in the Scottish capital. This was no ordinary landscape view, however; instead, it was the first exhibition of a new form of public entertainment for which Barker had secured a patent the previous year. His immense paintings, of which this was the first example, were displayed on the inside of an enormous cylinder that surrounded the observer. They heralded the start of what Erkki Huhtamo’s Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013. Pp. xx+456. $45) calls a form of “visual immersion” that became increasingly sophisticated as the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth (p. xvii). A few years later, Barker described his innovation as “The Panorama” (combining the Greek words for “all” and “view”)—a new term that appeared in print for the first time in an advertisement in the Oracle of 18 May 1791. He soon moved his panoramas to a purpose-built rotunda in Leicester Square, designed by the architect Robert Mitchell. And Barker predicted that his invention would prove to be “the greatest improvement to the art of painting that has ever yet been discovered” (Illusions in Motion, p. 1).

Over the next fifty years, huge circular panoramas presented audiences with increasingly sophisticated images, ranging from representations of historic battle scenes to depictions of foreign and exotic locations. As he had forecast, Barker’s invention was an immediate and sustained success, spawning a raft of imitations: some 126 panoramas were exhibited in London between 1793 and 1863. By the end of the nineteenth century, most
major European cities featured more than one purpose-built structure presenting panoramas.

Both Huhtamo and Denise Blake Oleksijczuk begin their respective books by detailing the genesis of the panorama in Barker’s images. Despite this, however, their texts soon diverge, as they take readers on two very different journeys through this crucial chapter in the history of visualization. Oleksijczuk’s *The First Panoramas: Visions of British Imperialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. Pp. vi+222. $29.95) focuses squarely on Barker and the ramifications of his invention. She considers the impact of the panorama on viewers in Britain and investigates what early efforts in this medium can tell us about British ideas of identity at a particularly febrile moment in European history, with Britain engaged in a military struggle with revolutionary France. In order to do so, Oleksijczuk concentrates on a small number of specific examples and reconstructs, as far as possible, the public responses to them.

Oleksijczuk suggests that viewers, who flocked to see panoramas in droves, sometimes paying up to three shillings to stand on a central platform under a skylight that offered even lighting across the entire canvas, would have “read,” or interpreted, these images in complex ways. Their responses were, she argues, necessarily shaped by their own political agendas and experiences, as well as reflecting broader national concerns. Put simply, developing ideas about nationalism and imperialism—forced in the smithy of global war with France—were deeply entwined with the development of this technology. Oleksijczuk maintains that the panoramas of Barker (and others) shrank “the world as they enlarged Britain’s place in it” (p. 171).

The exhibition in 1793 of the *View of the Grand Fleet Moored at Spithead* offers a pertinent example of this process. The canvas brought a view of Royal Navy ships, the country’s key military weapon, to the heart of London. The fleet was assembled off the south coast as part of the British effort to force the Russians to settle their territorial dispute with the Ottomans. On display in Leicester Square, however, the image brought viewers into close proximity with the “wooden walls” of England—the best bulwark against invasion the country could muster. A few years later, in 1801–02, the British alliance with the Ottomans was reinforced by the exhibition of a panorama of Constantinople, which Oleksijczuk discusses in chapter 4. Intriguingly, this scene was shown in two separate panoramas, offering viewpoints on opposite sides of the Bosporus. The sheer visual power of the medium to affect early audiences is probably lost on us today, but it is an important point and one made eloquently at various points in the book.

Notwithstanding their size and visual power, however, these panoramas were ephemeral. Very few survive from any era. One of the greatest difficulties in writing about them, therefore, is trying to convey a sense of what they might have looked like. To mitigate this, Oleksijczuk has identi-
fied some of the prints and engravings derived from them, and these are deployed to useful effect. *The First Panoramas* is rich in illustration, for which the University of Minnesota Press should be congratulated. A complete set of J. Wells’s images of Barker’s panoramic view of Edinburgh is included, for example; a color foldout reproduces aquatints of the three city views (Edinburgh, London, Constantinople) discussed in detail in the text. The book also offers a useful timeline of panorama exhibitions from 1794 to 1821.

One of the key features of the book is the author’s juxtaposition of the panoramas with the whole host of derivative images and explanatory texts that they inspired. Oleksijczuk has done a fine job of identifying these. Her interpretation of specific panoramas is informed by a careful interpretation of the printed “keys”—leaflets and descriptive booklets that accompanied them. She cites an impressively wide array of the printed material, period ephemera, and unpublished sources that accompanied these images. The tracing of such panoramas through published keys and contemporary reports is one of the most fruitful ways of recovering and understanding audiences’ responses and reactions. This is combined with other sources, such as diaries, reviews, personal letters, and advertisements. Explanatory keys to nearly every one of Barker’s early views survive, and by painstakingly comparing them, Oleksijczuk shows that these images are far more sophisticated and intriguing than many might have assumed. By at least partially overcoming the problems of reconstructing viewers’ responses, she is able to make her claim that the panorama had an important “role as a context for formulating new subjectivities” (p. 19) with some force, and it is a useful argument for historians of visual and popular media to consider.

At times, the analysis of the panoramas and other visual artifacts is somewhat overshadowed by the author’s extended discussions of various theories of visualization, ranging from Jacques Lacan to Henri Lefebvre. Nevertheless, this work adds to the impressive earlier scholarship of Richard Altick (*The Shows of London* [1978]) and Ralph Hyde (*Panorama!* [1988]). Although, as its name suggests, it is essentially the history of Barker’s invention, offering detailed readings of just three of Barker’s images, *The First Panoramas* is a contribution to the broader history of the technologies of visualization, which is also true of Huhtamo’s *Illusions in Motion*.

Huhtamo takes up the idea of the panorama, but the focus of his book is not on the immense though static panoramas of Barker and his imitators; instead, he concentrates on those of the “moving” variety, of which there were hundreds. Their history has been largely ignored until now—indeed, the author candidly admits that he only became aware of the phenomenon during the 1990s. The moving panorama was a long painting that unscrolled behind a “window” by means of a mechanical cranking system. It lent itself to being accompanied by a lecture, music, and sometimes
sound-and-light effects. Showmen exhibited such panoramas across Europe and America in venues that ranged from opera houses to church halls.

Huhtamo’s intellectual canvas is, perhaps inevitably, broad; his text ranges over the history of moving panoramas, bringing us from the early years of its invention to its mid-nineteenth-century apogee and beyond. For example, the closest parallel to Barker as the central figure for the moving panorama might be British journalist and writer Albert Smith, whose *Albert Smith’s Ascent of Mont Blanc*, performed for seven consecutive years (1852–58) at London’s Egyptian Hall, was perhaps the most successful moving panorama show of all time. (In addition, Smith’s career might be said to offer a study in microcosm of the formation of the modern media industry.) One might write a book about Smith; here, we find chapter 7 dedicated to him, with much history having come before and much to come after, for *Illusions in Motion* does not stop with Smith. Rather, it considers the competition faced by the moving panorama from magic-lantern shows, and it explores the final flowering of the panorama in the late nineteenth century. The final chapters of the book are more reflective, considering the afterlife of the panorama and its place in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature, journalism, science, philosophy, and propaganda. An appendix provides details of surviving moving panoramas and their current locations.

Huhtamo’s book is a contribution to what he refers to as “media archaeology,” an approach that surveys the surviving material evidence to gain greater understandings of how media were written about, designed, used, received, represented, and preserved. Both books will offer insights to readers in a number of academic disciplines and scholarly fields, from art history and media studies to imperial history, literature, and cultural studies. In doing so, the coverage of both is almost as wide as the panoramas that form the basis of their analyses.