

Notes and thoughts on  
Donald Lowe *History of Bourgeois Perception*  
by  
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First published in 1982, Donald Lowe's *History of Bourgeois Perception* has been widely and rightly recognized as one of the most original, important, influential, and generative books of our time. Emblematic of the crisis of confidence about dominant ways of knowing in the wake of the mid-twentieth century's social upheavals, perpetual wars, ecological crises, anti-colonial rebellions, and revanchist backlashes against democratic and egalitarian changes in social relations, Lowe presented an intellectual history of perception that identified the complex mechanisms that connect ways of knowing to embodied identities and unequal power.

In the wake of Michel Foucault's genealogies and archaeologies of knowledge and Thomas Kuhn's explorations into paradigm shifts in science, scholars started to produce self-reflexive critiques of the ways in which disciplinary confines and conventions both enabled and inhibited knowledge about the world. Critiques of art history by John Berger and Norman Bryson, of musicology by Christopher Small, of history by Hayden White, of anthropology by George Marcus and Michael M.J. Fischer, of science and philosophy by Donna Haraway, and of communication studies by Harold Innes and James Carey all explained how scholars help construct the world they purport to find. Lowe's book presented an intellectual history of perception and embodiment that revealed the constructed nature of taken-for-granted categories like temporality, spatiality, and linearity. Deftly blending Marxist and phenomenological approaches, Lowe explained how uncritical adoption of concepts developed in previous eras prevents us from perceiving the centrality of controlled consumption in our own lives. Perhaps most important, Lowe argued that the history of bourgeois perception was not yet finished, that future changes in communications technologies and social relations would produce new epistemologies and epistemes. He presented a method for future work that emphasized periodizing societies by analyzing changes in multi-level structures of communications and commerce; understanding perception as a product of communications media, hierarchies of sensing, and epistemic orders of discourse; and describing how lived experiences of time, space, and embodiment functioned with perceptual fields.

Because historians tend to study specialized periods, very few works of intellectual history display the range, reach, and scope of Lowe's *History of Bourgeois Perception*. Lowe's personal erudition and insights made this remarkable book possible, but the volume also owes much to his determination to search for patterns across time periods. Lowe's methodology challenged prevailing practices in the discipline of history. Instead of writing mostly about changes *within* time periods which he describes as alluvial and in harmony with prevailing patterns of thought, Lowe focused on changes *between* time periods which he portrays as seismic. He explains that emphasizing discontinuity and rupture between periods prevents us from succumbing to the temptation to see all changes as continuous, a way of seeing that precludes appreciation of seismic changes in the past as well as preparation for them in the future.

Ranging widely across countries and continents as well as decades and disciplines, Lowe's *History of Bourgeois Perception* traces the origins of contemporary scholarly

practices. He shows that it took the emergence of typographic culture to produce a new ideal of objective knowledge grounded in the separation of the content of knowledge from the actions of a knowing subject. Lowe explains that the elevation of visual knowledge entailed privileging distance and judgment over proximate intersubjectivity. In one of his most important chapters, Lowe identifies new understandings of development in time as crucial components of bourgeois society's ruling episteme from the late 1700s to the early 1900s. This new sense of time produced new time-bound concepts such as organism, function, structure, and development. These changes reflected and shaped the emergence of new social subjects who understood their own lives as segmented phases of development such as infancy, childhood, youth, adolescence, and adulthood. These new understandings of time as process led people to experience their lives as mechanical, discontinuous, and external, while at the same time giving rise to new temporalities instantiated in academic history, geology, and archaeology as well as in novels set in earlier periods. For Lowe, the past is always over, but constantly re-symbolized in the prevailing terms of the present. History to him is not the past but rather diverse representations of many different pasts.

One of the important features of *History of Bourgeois Perception* lies in the book's ability to reveal the persistence of practices from the past in the present while at the same time acknowledging the importance of historical ruptures and epistemic breaks. Lowe follows Foucault in explaining that the epistemic order of the Renaissance emphasized similarities while seventeenth and eighteenth century knowledge replaced similitude with comparisons of identity and difference. He then shows how the perceptual revolution of 1905-1915 exemplified in cubism destroyed assumptions about objective space and time while raising profound challenges to the ideal of the integrated individual person with a unique interiority. As he explains "At the very time when bourgeois society posited the individual personality as an ideal, life was really a multiplicity, fragmented by the spatial dichotomy between the public and the private, by the sexual bifurcation of 'masculinity' and 'femininity,' and by the scientific-philosophical dualism of body and mind." (p.88)