Strether Through the Looking Glass: The Ambassadors and the Culture of Optical Illusion

To cultivate illusions is apparently the science of Parisian life: vanity must have its pabulum and fancy its triumph, though pride is sacrificed and sense violated thereby; hence a coincidence of thrift and wit, shrewdness and sentimentality, love of excitement and patient endurance, superficial enjoyment and essential deprivation--Henry Tuckerman, 1867

Let two mirrors reflect each other: then Satan plays his favorite trick and opens here in his way . . . the perspective on infinity. Be it now divine, now satanic, Paris has a passion for mirror-like perspectives. The Arc de Triomphe, the Sacre Coeur, even the Pantheon, appear, from a distance like images hovering above the ground and opening, architecturally, a fata morgana.
--Walter Benjamin, c. 1929

This essay is part of a larger inquiry that asks what media theory from Walter Benjamin through Marshall McLuhan through Friedrich Kittler can tell us about Henry James, and, perhaps more importantly, what Henry James can tell us about media theory —that of his time and our own. The James side of the argument has occupied the greater part of my attention, and for good reason: of all the nineteenth and early twentieth century writers I know, James was by far the most attentive to emerging technologies of expression, representation, and dissemination. James owned a telephone and wrote a story about a telegraph; he had his picture taken by a daguerreotypist and commissioned photographs for the frontispieces of the New York editions of his collected works; he published in the new mass-market illustrated magazines (McClure's, Harper's) made possible by such innovations as linotype and cheap pulp paper; he dictated his work to a typewriter (as they were called), a woman who typed it into the newly designed Remington machine whose
sound he found conducive to oral composition: he went to the movies. If he were alive today, doubtless James would own an I-phone and be conducting polysyllabic communications with a verbally challenged Siri.

Looking at James this way doesn’t just challenge our view of him as the austere high-culture man of letters *cum* dinner-party fiend; it also emphasizes the role that he played in shaping a fully modern consciousness. Nowhere is this clearer than in James’s engagements with technologies of visuality. Not so much, I should stress, his long-standing and much written-about engagement with visual art, although this is part of my concern. Nor am I interested exactly in the implications of his voyeuristic sensibility which has served as such a powerful goad to James criticism from Laurence Holland’s *Expense of Vision* to the present day. What I propose to do instead is to bring to bear on James a body of writing and analysis that interrogates the construction of visuality *per se*, and which sees the fin-de-siècle as a crucial moment in the formulation of this understanding of the visual, its powers, its limitations. Or even more specifically, I’m going to be considering a fin-de-siècle version of visual culture to which most analysts of visual culture studies have turned away from, one grounded in the pragmatist tradition via well-known figures such as Charles Sanders Pierce or William James and by less well-known ones, like Pierce’s student Joseph Jastrow or James’s colleague Hugo Munsterberg—a tradition with which, I want to argue, Henry James is in spirited dialogue. Indeed, James shares with the visual artists of his moment as well as with these theorists a fascination with the problem of the real in the increasingly powerful regime of the visual—with the kinds of trickery to which the eye is subject and by which the head
and the heart alike are gulled. My example will be *The Ambassadors*, a novel written at exactly the same moment as these theorists were considering the phenomenon of optical illusions and, at least in Munsterberg’s case, its relation to the emergent new idiom of film—and the same moment at which William Harnett was producing *trompe-l’oeil* paintings and when G.A. Smith and George Méliès were creating wildly experimental, eye-tricking effects on film. James creates a similar illusion-ridden optic for his tragic-comic protagonist Lambert Strether, who consistently mis-sees in his adventure in Paris. Strether’s experience of *trompe-l’oeil* in this “vast ironic city” persistently leads him astray, as he is over and over again tricked by the seeming evidence before his eyes—with results ultimately comic and tragic, ridiculous and sublime. And the consequence of Strether’s experience is to make James question the nature and possibilities of illusions themselves, with responses not that different from, but perhaps more trenchant than, those of his peers in the visual arts.

First, a few word of background, both technological and meta-critical. Although technologies of vision have been refined and enhanced from time immemorial, and given obvious impetus by the perfection of lenses in the 15th and 16th centuries, it was in the nineteenth century that they took the radical leaps we associate with modernity. From Claude glasses to daguerreotypes and thereafter the Kodak snapshot camera; from the stereoscope to the kinetoscope to the zoopraxiscope (and many other such scopes) to the motion picture camera and projector-- through these and more, the century witnessed an explosion of new visual technologies detonating with particular force in the years between 1890 and 1910. I use the
trope “detonate” with some self-consciousness, since it’s similar to one that the most influential theorist of this development, Walter Benjamin, uses to describe the effects of this phenomenon. His words speak to directly to film, but they apply as well to all the manifestations of visual culture in the long fin-de-siècle (1870-1914):

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling . . . Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man... The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.

This is among the most formative texts in the visual culture studies; indeed, it’s been so often cited that its ephebes can no doubt quote it in their sleep. Familiar, too, is its combination of Jewish apocalyptic mysticism, Marxism, and Freudianism, which run in powerful and compelling ways from Barthes through Rosalind Krauss and other critics organized loosely in the journal October through the field-reshaping work of Jonathan Crary. For all these, new technologies and new media generated in late capitalism create an entirely new sensorium and with them new forms of subjectivity which operate on levels best analyzed in visual terms—ultimately, via the ministrations of Freud, Lacan and feminist film criticism, by such concepts as the gaze, the mirror stage, and the like.

But there’s another way of looking at the same period and its cultural phenomena. Art historian Michael Leja has reminded us (following the lead of Karen Halttunen and Neil Harris) that for nineteenth-century subjects the new urban megalopolis that introduced new possibilities of trickery, from con-men and identity-thievers to
the wildly popular museums of PT. Barnum. Leja suggests that proliferating visual
culture of the period both epitomized and enhanced this process as magic lantern
shows, X-rays, spirographs, spirit photographs (produced by double exposure),
advertisements, as well as photography and early film, provided a proliferation of
seemingly authentic but often factitious images for a culture already profoundly
worried about authenticity. Leja reads such phenomena as the controversy over
spirit photographs—a controversy which brought no less a figure than Barnum to
testify in the trial for criminal fraud prime spirit photographer of the era, William
Mumler ---the realist art of Eakins; the trompe-l’oeil painting of Harnett; and the
writing of a host of art critics as responses to the problem of the real in the culture
of the visual. The period, Leja argues, is marked by the valorization of a skeptical
gaze-- “looking askance,” to cite the title of his book—to the full unfolding of whose
dynamics he turns to the insights of American pragmatism, especially those of
Charles Sanders Pierce and William James.

Leja’s ambitions are different from Benjamin’s, and his achievement of course
more field-specific. But the best use of his work, I think, is to point us to a different
way of analyzing the cultural situation of the fin-de-siècle and to an alternative
tradition for registering the psychic reformulations it underwent. If Benjamin taps
into the Marxist/Freudian underground, the pragmatists to whom Leja refers
frequently grounded themselves in direct empirical observation. Although they
often ended up in a similar place to the one in which the post-Benjaminian critical
tradition did—showing a fascination with mental function and particular interest in
non-conscious dimensions of mind-- they remained more optimistic about the
ability of the mind to mount a creative response to the world of confused sense-experience and pointed in the direction of what one might want to call a phenomenology of visual illusion-making, an analytic that placed the illusory capacities of visual perception at the center of consciousness itself.

My way into this nest of issues in fin-de-siècle American pragmatism and its fellow travelers is the obsession with optical illusions. Such illusions are, as it were, the flip side of the apocalyptic order for which Benjamin sees photography and film opening up; instead of rendering a new, transfigured world lying within the ordinary they present already-existing vision as a mise-en-âbime, in which the visual field proves to be profoundly ambiguous, filled with the potential to mislead, gull, or beguile the unwary perceiver. And while illusory phenomena have been with us since time immemorial, they get theorized most fully in this period by these thinkers and do complex work there.

Consider, for example, the famous rabbit/duck diagram, of which E.H. Gombrich makes such rich and powerful use of in his generative book, *Art and Illusion*. (1954). Gombrich's famous argument here is that all of representational art is, in precisely its claim to represent, as in, for example, its use of perspective, a version of illusion-making shaped by artistic convention—and the rabbit/duck illustration, which one can see either as a rabbit or a duck but not both at the same time, is his first, prime instance. Interestingly, the rabbit-duck illustration both been adduced as an optical illusion and not defined as one; Gombrich treats it as an illusion, but the text to which he alludes, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, first published in 1953, did not: Wittgenstein reminds us that when we see both rabbit and duck, we see
both rabbit and duck, that we are not tricked into seeing something that is not there but rather see something that is, and that can be looked at in two ways:

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Perhaps so—it’s never wise to argue with Wittgenstein. But it’s significant for our purposes to note that the phenomenon was first noticed in the fin-de-siècle as part of an ongoing discourse on optical illusion-making. It originated, as best as I can tell, in 1892 in a German magazine-cum-jokebook, the Fliegende Blätter
and was subsequently picked up in 1895 by Harper's Weekly--
--before being cited and commented upon in a book by American psychologist Joseph Jastrow, whom Wittgenstein actually cites although Gombrich does not. Wittgenstein may be citing Jastrow, and Gombrich ignoring him because the latter is frequently cited by William James, whom, scholars tell us, Wittgenstein was also reading at the time of thinking through many of the issues involved in the *Philosophical Investigations*. And this fascinating character suggests a different genealogy for and way of thinking about visuality than even the one offered in Gombrich or Wittgenstein, much less Benjamin: a route that goes directly through the James family.

Son of a distinguished rabbi and brother of a professor of Semitic languages, Jastrow lost his faith early and converted to the new religion of social science, and especially the emerging new science of psychology, in which he received the first American doctorate, from Hopkins, in 1886. Still at Hopkins, he collaborated with his teacher Charles Sanders Pierce on a study arguing ingeniously for the power of subliminal knowledge, one in which they suggested that their experimental work “gives new reason for believing that we gather what is passing in one another’s minds from sensations so faint that we are not fully aware of having them and can reach no account of how we reached our conclusions about such matters.” Later, in his elaboration of what he called “pragmaticism,” Pierce was later to call this process “abduction,” and add it to “induction” and “deduction” as one of the many ways in which human beings attain knowledge of the mysterious world that confronts them. More about this, in the context of that notorious abductor Henry James, later.
After a brief stint at Cornell, where he was conspicuously not offered a job, Jastrow found a home at the University of Wisconsin, where he founded the psychology department, set up a psychology laboratory, and wrote a number of scientific papers and books devoted for the most part to the non-conscious processes of the mind: to "dissociations of mental processes, slips, lapses, suggestibility, daydreams, voluntary-involuntary distinctions, subliminal perception, and multiple personality." He was therefore also fascinated with tricky visual phenomena, and is actually credited with inventing an optical illusion all his own, the so-called Jastrow illusion:

![The Jastrow illusion: A and B are the same size](image)

Jasstrow was also interested in popularizing his research, both during this period and later in his career; indeed, his 1900 *Fact and Fable in Psychology*, the book that provided Wittgenstein with his source for the rabbit-duck, was a best-seller. Most saliently, Jastrow was a professional colleague of William James’s and a great admirer of Henry’s. William James’s letters are full of inquiries from Jastrow about
matters financial and professional as well as intellectual. William’s attitude towards Jastrow seemed to have mixed respect and condescension, perhaps marked by a touch of anti-Semitism. Although he cites with respect Jastrow’s work, there’s also a letter from James to President Eliot castigating the field at large, claiming that Jastrow possessed a “narrowish intellect and some uncomfortable peculiarities of character,” both of course standard slurs against Jews at the time. Jastrow of course never knew about William’s reservations, and continued to think of him as a friend and mentor for rest of William’s life; indeed, the two vacationed near each other in Maine and were under care of the same physician there for bouts of depression. Jastrow’s attitude towards Henry James was equally reverential. Jastrow considered himself quite the stylist; his books his are full of rhetorical flourishes, over-elaborate metaphors, ornate circumlocutionary constructions—in other words, they resemble the contemporary writing of Henry James, only without the talent. No wonder then that his biographer tells us that he wrote two unpublished stories in the late Jamesian manner.

Jastrow interests me in and of himself, but all the more in the present context, in his role as the missing link between the nascent science of psychology, American pragmatism, and the James family. As far as the first is concerned, he can remind us of the interest within the early decades of the field of psychology itself in such phenomena as optical illusions and other tricks of visual perception, an interest evident not only in Jastrow or in James but also in contemporaries like the German polymath Hermann Helmholtz or James’s protégé and colleague at Harvard, Hugo Munsterburg. But this work went in different directions. Even as Munsterberg,
along with Jastrow’s student Stanley Hall, took American experimental psychology in decidedly un-Jamesian directions—seeing the environment as controlling perception and hence behavior, and leading in the directions of behaviorism and industrial psychology—Jastrow and James both took the facts of optical illusion to indicate the ability of the mind actively to create the world it lives in.

Jastrow argued for these powers in his early work and with increasing fervor as he took on, later in his career, Freudianism and behaviorism, both of which he saw as cultish mechanistic denials of the creative, adaptive powers of the human mind. William James similarly turned to a vision of psychology that emphasizes the mind’s creative powers but which also brings him—and us--directly into the problem of the real. William ends his long description of optical illusions in Principles of Psychology with the resounding words: “Enough has been said . . . to prove the general law of perception, which is that whilst part of what we perceive comes from the object before us, another part (and it may be the larger part) always comes . . . out of our own head.”

And far more than Pierce or Helmholtz, both of whom argued similarly for the generation of a sense of the real from the mind as well as the eyes, James goes on to celebrate this capacity, to identify ordinary mental processes with creativity, generativity, the making of art. As he writes elsewhere in Principles, “The mind . . . works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone. In a sense the statue stood there from eternity. . . .there were a thousand different ones beside it, and the sculptor alone is to thank for having extricated this one from the rest.”
This claim extends into a vision that triumphs over, reductive, scientific constructions of the real: “Just so the world of each of us, howsoever different our views of it may be, all lay embedded in the primordial chaos of sensations, which gave the mere matter to the thought of all of us indifferently. We are led by our reasonings to unwind things back to that black and jointless continuity of space and moving clouds of swarming atoms which science calls the only real world. But all the while the world we feel and live in will be that in which our ancestors and we, by slow cumulative strokes of choice, have extricated out of this...” But the very forms of order-making only delay the onset of the crisis of the real, for to contemplate the possibility of the mind-as-sculptor is also to confront the possibilities of “other minds, other worlds from the same monotonous and inexpressive chaos! My world is but one in a million alike embedded, alike real to those who may abstract them...” William’s solution to the problem is his own distinct form of pragmatism, a suspension of the epistemological dilemmas he has posed in favor of asking for an accounting of the value of what is at stake in any given position—an emotionally satisfying reformulation of the problem, but it must be admitted not, in a strict philosophical sense, a resolution to it.

We seem to have come a long way here from our early concerns with visual culture and the crisis of the real; so let me back up to address about their relevance here before moving forward to the other member of the James family who is germane here, Henry. Surely it is no coincidence that the rise of concern with optical illusions as a theme in American psychology should have been so acute at this particular cultural moment, because the new visual culture of the period
presented a cavalcade of such illusions, as Leja has so eloquently argued. This way
of thinking leads to the form of inquiry I have sketched above, which I see as
symptomatic of what Martin Jay would call a ocularacentric world increasingly
aware of the fragility of knowledge produced by eyes and groping for a way of
responding to that fragility. It also shaped the ways in which the era thought about
the new media of the era, especially film and all of the manifold optical devices
which preceded the emergence of film.

Thus the illusory nature of film itself—the fact that it is produced as an optical
illusion, the succession of still images which the mind syncopes into continuous
movement—is the very basis of the art for James’s colleague Munsterberg, whose
studies of “illusions of motion” him to write the first major critical study of the
are also important to Jastrow and to William James, both of whom use the same
example to illustrate them, that of a spectator watching the station appear to move
as the train leaves the station. But illusions as such were central to early film itself,
too; that new medium was not just a powerful example of these illusions, but a
counter-discourse about them, one which turned from skepticism about illusion to
celebration of them. Not coincidentally, illusions were solicited and thematized by
early film itself, which turned quickly from the Lumière Brothers’s famous *Train
Arriving at La Citotat* (1896) (the notorious film of the train which caused a crowd
to riot after it appeared to crash into them). to the vogue in following years for so-
called “phantom rides,” shots taken from trains themselves, vividly illustrating the
James/Jastrow/Munsterberg illusion of a moving world created by a train in motion.
Indeed, much of early film itself delights in not only celebrating its in capacity to making realistic illusions but its capacity to make new ones via cutting, trick photography and the like—often in ways that invoke cognate media or pseudo-media like X-rays or spirit photographs. Not only George Méliès but also his British contemporary G.A. Smith were producing illusionistic films that foreground new technologies of vision the former of course working in Paris, the latter about in Brighton, about 60 miles away from Rye, both at the very moment James was writing *The Sacred Fount* and *The Ambassadors*.

And it’s here that I see role of Henry James, mediating between the celebratory experimental mode of the silent filmmakers on the one hand and the skepticism of pragmatists on the other. Illusions of all sorts, of course, proliferate throughout the Jamesian canon, their ironies reverberating on multiple levels: Isabel Archer believes that Gilbert Osmond is a worthy husband Millie believes Kate Croy to be her friend; Maggie believes her husband to be honest and so on. These illusions, and the puncturing of same, are frequently instantiated by visual epiphenomena which resemble the kinds of experimentation going on elsewhere in James’s culture. Here are two examples, not coincidentally occurring in two of the most celebrated moments in James’s fictions. In the 1876 story *Daisy Miller*, Winterbourne, the protagonist, is a classic-self negating narrator, unknowingly indicting himself for his own hypocrisy, judgmentality, and emotional inhibitedness in the act of appreciating and then judging the beautiful young but terminally naïve Daisy Miller. He reaches his final condemnatory stance towards her when he encounters Daisy and her lover Giovanelli in the Roman Colosseum, the ruins of which create a
pattern of light and shadow, in which he stands in the former while Daisy and Giovanelli canoodle in the darkness. Decrying the couple, “Winterbourne stopped, with a sort of horror, and, it must be added, with a sort of relief. It was as if a sudden illumination had been flashed upon the ambiguity of Daisy’s behavior, and the riddle had become easy to read. She was a young lady whom a gentleman need no longer be at pains to respect. He stood there, looking at her-- looking at her [and] not reflecting that though he saw them vaguely, he himself must have been more brightly visible. “ The passage invokes a remarkably complex set of puns on the internal and the external capacities of vision, puns that resonate throughout the Western philosophical and poetic traditions alike, in which words like “illumination” and “reflection” refer simultaneously to ocular and mental processes. But here the relation is reversed and ironized. Winterbourne’s inner “illumination” here is confuted by his physical situation. He us standing in a light in which she can see Daisy but he can’t really see her: his failure to “reflect” upon his own position in the Coliseum indicates, in its turn, the lack of reflection in his judgment of her, which exposes more about himself than it tells us anything about her. And there’s a technological analogue as well. The effect of light and shadow upon which this passage depends, Hui-hui Hu has reminded me, on the same effect as that created by the so-called pinhole camera- a camera that traps and records light and shadow on a plate without the use of a lens: the Coliseum, in this reading, is a gigantic pinhole or primitive camera trapping light and shadow, the scene the print it casts out of this play of light and shadow. To put it bluntly, James’s represented scene offers us a camera-shot of Winterbourne’s obtuseness here, lit by the silver glow of the moon.
James turns to optics again in another great moment in his oeuvre, the famous Chapter 42 of *Portrait of a Lady*, where Isobel Archer’s inward meditations on her marriage are wrought in front of a fire, the flickering flames of which mimic “Her mind, assailed by visions [which] was in a state of extraordinary activity, and her visions might as well come to her there, where she sat up to meet them, as on her pillow, to make a mockery of rest.” Again, play of mind is rendered in terms of light which creates kind of an objective correlative internalized theater of flickering vision; and again this figure is strikingly similar nature and form to one of the emerging visual technologies of his era, in this case the magic lantern, the immediate predecessor of film, the vogue for which begins at precisely this era.

Lest these connections seem tenuous, I would observe that at precisely the same moment there begin to occur in James’s writing actual, allusions to new visual technologies of illusion-making rather than references to flickering light and shadow that are cognate to them. At the beginning of *What Maisie Knew*, for example, the text compares Maisie’s awareness of her peculiar situation to “images bounding across the wall in the slide of a magic-lantern. Her little world was phantasmagoric—strange shadows dancing on a sheet.” Or consider the other famous reference to film technologies in James’s 1909 story “Crapy Cornelia”, where the arrival of a woman’s head to one of James’s sex-fearing narrators “grew and grew, that came nearer and nearer, while it met his eyes, after the matter of images in a kinematograph. It had present loomed so large that he saw nothing else…” The point to be made here is not that James refers to these technologies—surely it’s significant that, in the dense proliferation of metaphors that mark his later style,
there are so very few of such—but rather that in both latter cases they invoke the illusory quality of human consciousness, the capacity for self-delusion. Magic-lanterns and the cinematograph, for him, exist as corollaries of the human capacity for making illusions, indeed of the human need for making illusions, rather than the other way around.

And it is precisely the nature and value of these illusions, and the consequences of same, that are weighed in *The Ambassadors*, James's most advanced treatise in the phenomenon of illusion-making. Indeed, the very title of the novel alludes to a famous *trompe-l'oeil* painting, Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, in which a group of very pleased-looking diplomatic figures pose in front of a series of measuring instruments which designate the chance of knowing the world visually—sextants, astrolabes and the like—while underneath them, from a completely different perspective, outside the capacity of reckoning, an anamorphic representation of a death's head lurks.
Although time is very much on James’s mind too—as is mortality—it’s primarily the illusory nature of the representation itself what carries over from the painting into the novel. Lambert Strether, like Isabel Archer, is an innocent abroad; and he persistently mistakes what he encounters in Paris—not just the nature of what he encounters, but the actual facts of it—in the course of his sublime bumbling through the novel, over the course of which he gets absolutely everything wrong. Sent to bring his patron and Intended the fearsome Mrs. Newsome, home from Paris, Strether is systematically misled by his friends to believe that Chad’s relation with the woman who keeps him there, Madame de Vionnet is a virtuous one; disabused of this notion—and idealizing Madame de Vionnet in turn—Strether then misjudges
Chad’s character, thinking that the great improvement in manners and sensitivity Madame de Vionnet has wrought in him means correlated with moral growth; Chad disappoints him by, not to put it too bluntly, dumping Madame de Vionnet and—perhaps just as bad, for Strether, going off to become an advertising man, a maker, a vendor, that is of false images. Having misjudged everything, Strether returns home having lost, well, everything—having lost his illusions in Paris, and having lost Mrs. Newsome in order to acquire them.

Strether’s illusioning and disillusioning is wrought through a series of scenes in which the evidence of his eyes leads him to false judgments, and it’s not surprising that James turns towards language of optical illusion in order to make this point manifest. The first, in fact the master of such tropes, is the one that occurs on his arrival in Paris. Characteristically delaying his first encounter with Chad, Strether strolls through Paris, affecting the pose of a carefree boulevardier or Benjaminian flâneur, temporarily overwhelmed by the sensations—“his cup of impressions flowing over”—until he settles down to contemplate the scene at the Luxembourg Gardens. There, he fears that he has given up his moral authority to chasten Chad as he becomes re-enchanted with the city:

His greatest uneasiness seemed to peep at him out of the imminent impression that almost any acceptance of Paris might give one’s authority away. It hung before him this morning, the vast bright Babylon, like some huge iridescent object, a jewel brilliant and hard, in which parts were not to be discriminated nor differences comfortably marked. It twinkled and trembled and melted together, and what seemed all surface one moment seemed all depth the next.”

As the epigraphs with which I began this piece suggest, Paris has characteristically been figured as a place of visual illusion—a veritable hall of mirrors; and again, to
draw on the art of James’s own moment, the artists who rendered Paris frequently at his moment, the Impressionists, frequently turned to illusions that sought to render they as they disrupted the conventions of representation—the technique of daubing two patches of color next to one another to suggest a third, for example, or pointillism in the manner of Seurat, which rests on the assumption that the eye will organize the manifold dots of paint into meaningful patterns à la William James’s understanding of the creative role optical illusions in the making of perception itself, an act which representation so understood mimes. Proust, as so often, puts the matter best when he describes the work of his impressionist painter Elstir as “the effort to reproduce things not as he knew them to be but according to the optical illusions of which our first sight of them is composed…”

James is, as we shall see, close to this Proustian position, but he gets there through the invocation of a different kind of illusion: Paris is figured as a variant of the rabbit-duck illusion, one in which one can see either the surface or the depth but not both at the same time. Specifically, the illusion invoked here is a variant of this one mass-produced at the very time James was writing, that generated by the stereoscope—invented in 1839 by Sir James Brewster and perfected by the James family friend Sir Oliver Wendell Holmes—in which two images of the same object are produced and, by means of mirrors and other refractive devices, positioned so as to be seen by each eye in such a way as to create the effect of three-dimensionality. The stereoscope was the most common viewing device of the nineteenth-century, a staple of middle-class households and the major way, before the invention of the rotogravure and hence the illustrated press, the means by which
they accessed images on a daily basis. The three-dimensional image produced by the stereoscope was profoundly equivocal. On the one hand, the stereoscope was known, and praised, as an optical illusion, emphasis on that last word. Yet, as Holmes writes, the illusion is one that pushes in the direction of the real. “All pictures in which perspective and light and shade are properly managed, have more or less the effect of solidity; but by this instrument that effect is so heightened as to produce an appearance of reality which cheats the senses with its seeming truth.” The truth is it is both at one and the same time. As anyone who has donned 3-d glasses knows, the effect generated is oddly distorted; the objects in the foreground leap out at the viewer, the background recedes in ways that are deeply and persistently unnatural. As Jonathan Crary puts it, “In such images the depth is essentially different from anything in painting or photography. We are given an insistent sense of “in front of” or “in back of” that seems to organize the [stereoscopic] image as a sequence of receding planes . . . But the experience of space between these objects (planes) is not one of gradual and predictable recession; rather, there is a vertiginous uncertainty about the distance separating forms.” The effect is to allow one to see surface or depth but not both at the same time—A foreground or a background? a rabbit or a duck? These are the question that come to be posed to the mind by the pursuit of heightened sense of reality that question is the goal of stereoscopy.

There are two points of contact I want to mention here between the stereoscope and Strether. The first is that the enthusiasm for the stereoscope in middle-class America had much to do with a new culture of tourism that emerged in the later
years of the nineteenth century, which is to say that a Strether, who had been there before, or a Mrs. Newsome, who had not, would likely have experienced Paris by stereoscope back in Massachusetts before Strether ventures there again. Jamesian as this turn may be, however, it seems to me that the true relation between the stereoscope and the novel is, as the ones I have been suggesting above, homological. My point here isn’t that James invokes the stereoscope in order to gloss Strether’s perception of Paris, but that rather he generates for Strether an optic which, like the stereoscope, walks the fine line between truth and illusion, reality and fake, by complicating the relation between foreground and background. And this optic, is the best gloss of Strether’s experience—of what he can and cannot distinguish in the City of Light, the trope his language of lambent play also alludes to. On some level, both his statements about Paris—that it is all surface one moment and all depth the next-- are deeply true about his own experience there. The depths, especially depths having to do with sexual knowledge, are indeed profound: Chad is indeed Madame de Vionnet’s lover, little Bilham, his friend, has been indeed deceiving him, Chad will indeed act out of motives of selfishness; But then again, so are the surfaces: Chad is exactly what he seems---a healthy young Pagan; for all of Stether’s idealizations, the relationship with Madame de Vionnet is exactly what it appears to be, and this is apparent to just everyone in Paris itself. Strether’s response is to switch instantly from overvaluing surface to overperceiving depths, espying them everywhere: learning of the real nature of the relation between the two, he goes to the Post Office and, in a fit of near paranoia, imagines everyone around him filling out forms to telegraphing messages of love, flirtation, assignation rather than—as
was most often the case, scholars of the post tell us, doctor's appointments or commercial transactions. The optical illusion that is Paris, in other words, parses emotional and intellectual truths that afford, for Strether, a strikingly paradoxical resolution: that the depth is the surface, and that it's his inability to see both at the same time that leads to the haunting comedy of the book, in which Strether alternates between visions that are too shallow and too deep. That it is an optical illusion James uses to gloss this problem suggests that Strether's problem is not just his but Everyman's, that he is simply human, all too human—that his failures are built into the human perceptual equipment itself, which is by nature incapable of dealing with the doubleness that it Paris.

To emphasize this point, James crafts for Strether a series of misperceptions which are deeply comic in nature, but the very nature of which, too, is analogized by the illusion. The number of optical mistakes Strether makes throughout the book is remarkable. When he first goes to Chad's rooms on the Boulevard Malesherbes, he looks up to expecting to see Chad on the balcony, only to see a different man, who turns out to be Little Billee, of whom “Strether wondered at first if he were perhaps Chad altered, and then saw that this was asking too much of alteration.” When he goes to the Opera, a different man comes into his box, whom Strether does not at first recognize but who turns out to be Chad. When he goes to Notre Dame, Strether sees a praying woman, who, on second glance, turns out to be Madame de Vionnet. When Chad parades Mademoiselle de Vionnet in front of Strether, leading him further in the erroneous belief that it is she whom he is interested in, he falls into the visual trap:
A young girl in a white dress and a softly plumed white hat had suddenly come into view, and what was presently clear was that her course was toward them. What was clearer still was that the handsome young man at her side was Chad Newsome, and what was clearest of all was that she was therefore Mademoiselle de Vionnet, that she was unmistakably pretty . . . that Chad now, with a consummate calculation of effect, was about to present her to his old friend’s vision. What was clearest of all indeed was something much more than this, something at the single stroke of which—and wasn’t it simply juxtaposition?—all vagueness vanished. It was the click of a spring—he saw the truth. [For] What young man had ever paraded about that way, without a reason, a maiden in her flower?

Paradoxically, here, too, in the surface is the depth: his eyes tell him all he needs to know, that Chad is making a “consummate calculation of effect,” i.e. that he has taken Strether’s measure and is all the better able to take advantage of his illusions about Chad, and for that matter Madame and Mme. de Vionnet. But because poor Strether by now is so focused on the depth—for what he thinks the reason for Chad’s behavior—he misses what is right before his eyes, the depths as it were of Chad’s shallowness.

The greatest moment of mis-seeing in the book, however, occurs near the end, when Strether goes to spend a day in the country by himself. At this moment, he doesn’t just court, he actively embraces illusion, imagining for himself that he is entering a painting of the countryside by the mediocre landscape artist, Lambinet. In the midst of that playful illusion, however, he is disabused of another, for the couple he sees rowing on the river to the same inn at which he is staying, are none other than Chad and Madame de Vionnet, spending their last hours together,

What he saw was exactly the right thing—a boat advancing round the bend and containing a man who held the paddles and a lady, at the stern, with a pink parasol. It was suddenly as if these figures, or something like them, had been wanted in the picture, had been wanted more or less all day, and had now drifted into sight, with
the slow current, on purpose to fill up the measure. They came slowly, floating down, evidently directed to the landing-place near their spectator and presenting themselves to him not less clearly as the two persons for whom his hostess was already preparing a meal. For two very happy persons he found himself straightway taking them—a young man in shirt-sleeves, a young woman easy and fair, who had pulled pleasantly up from some other place and, being acquainted with the neighbourhood, had known what this particular retreat could offer them. The air quite thickened, at their approach, with further intimations; the intimation that they were expert, familiar, frequent—that this wouldn't at all events be the first time. They knew how to do it, he vaguely felt—and it made them but the more idyllic, though at the very moment of the impression, as happened, their boat seemed to have begun to drift wide, the oarsman letting it go. It had by this time none the less come much nearer—near enough for Strether to dream the lady in the stern had for some reason taken account of his being there to watch them. She had remarked on it sharply, yet her companion hadn't turned round; it was in fact almost as if our friend had felt her bid him keep still. She had taken in something as a result of which their course had wavered, and it continued to waver while they just stood off. This little effect was sudden and rapid, so rapid that Strether’s sense of it was separate only for an instant from a sharp start of his own. He too had within the minute taken in something, taken in that he knew the lady whose parasol, shifting as if to hide her face, made so fine a pink point in the shining scene. It was too prodigious, a chance in a million, but, if he knew the lady, the gentleman, who still presented his back and kept off, the gentleman, the coatless hero of the idyll, who had responded to her start, was, to match the marvel, none other than Chad.

This passage encapsulates many of the I have been trying to draw together here. In some ways, it carries us back to the concern with subliminal perception that marked Jastrow’s early work with Pierce; Strether’s perceptual process here is marked by acts of a) abduction (intimations, vague feelings about the couple which bear fruit only when he recognizes them, conveyed in the language of dream and art); b) induction—reasoning from identifying them that they are there to have lunch; and c) deduction, guessing, on the basis of a) and b) what the true nature of their relationship might be. In that sense, it comports itself to Pierce’s pragmaticism, his “dream” of Madame de Vionnet’s perception of him representing precisely the Jastrowian/Piercian argument for believing that “we gather what is passing in one another’s minds from sensations so faint that we are not fully aware
of having them.” But note how it confutes Pierce’s faith in the social nature of
knowledge: the abduction leads Strether to recognize not the shared nature of his
and Madame de Vionnet’s regarding of each other, but rather the difference between
them as they recognize, with a certain degree of terror, each other’s embodiment of
their own worst fear. One can only imagine the thought-bubbles popping out of
their heads in the never-to-exist comic book version of the novel: “Oh my God, they
ARE lovers!” over Strether’s; “Sacré bleu! We have been discovered!” over Madame
de Vionnet’s.

But it seems to me most fruitful to think about this moment as the enactment
and dispelling of an optical illusion that takes its place with many that were both
prior to and contemporaneous with James. For with its picturesque (in the technical
sense of the word) landscape mobilized by Strether’s fantasy that he might enter
into it and set into motion by a boat passing into, and completing the picture, the
scene plays with of the forms of representation and criticism that preceded James in
such a way as to prepare for those of his moment. The topos of the spectator
entering a work of art, especially a landscape, Michael Fried has suggested, is central
to one aspect of Diderot’s art criticism; for Fried, this topos is grounded in the nature
of landscape painting itself, which grows out of the tableau tradition familiar from
French theater and activated, in the nineteenth century, by the form of the tableau
vivant (see Edith Wharton’s House of Mirth, contemporary with James’s
Ambassadors, for a great version.) It’s one small step, in other words, from
witnessing a landscape as if it were a real tableau and then stepping into that
enlivened, embodied representation. What makes this Jamesian tableau fascinating,
however, is not only the fantasy projection into it—a fantasy which Strether gives up in the passage I have quoted for the adoption of the stance of the spectator that Fried argues is explored in this fantasy—but also that there is a boat *moving* in it—and the fact that the boat’s lazy motion completes, rather than violates, the pictorial qualities. This then is a tableau vivant with a difference—with real people and props moving within it, rather than showing adopting a frozen stance that mimics a picture’s frozenness. It is, in short, a kind of silent movie.

We can make the identification between tableaux and silent film more precisely (Fried, by the way, mentions it in a footnote) via the figure of Georges Meliès. Film historians suggest that Meliès’s mise-en-scene is precisely that of the tableau vivant: Noel Burch writes, for example, that “he was the filmmaker of the *tableau-vivant* as it was practiced (as it is still practiced) in French spectacular variety shows as well as in the Theatre Robert-Houdin” (where Meliès got his start as a stage-magician). Many shots or whole films are presented as no more no less than a series of stages leading up to an *apothèose*, the term used in the theater of the time for the tableau-vivant…” In for example, his 1905 film *The Mermaid*, Meliès plays a magician who somehow manages to enter a fishbowl that contains a mermaid (don’t ask), whom he then leads through a number of Odalisque-like poses on a clamshell, half-Degas, half Botticelli. Or consider his *10,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, the *apothose* of which, complete with a parade of trident-carrying lobsters, Martin Scorsese recreates beautifully in *Hugo*, indeed projecting his own actresses into Meliès’s original shots in a brilliant display of cinema’s ability to create new
illusions that remind us that the old ones, too, were wrought with a sense of imagination and wonder
Again, the point isn't that James is invoking or alluding to Meliès; as I said before, there's no evidence that he ever saw a Meliès film and one doubts that he would have responded terribly well if he had. The point however is that James's imagination is working in ways analogous to those of his cinematic contemporaries, thinking of ways, that is, in which visual art might be put in motion in the service of creating spectacle. Or rather that, again, James is seeking to create effects that would render an internal theater of illusion-making in ways that bring him close to the imaginary embrace of illusion that Meliès celebrates. That there are a lot of effects of a similar working out of cognate to this—they pervade, in excelsis, James's novella *The Scared Fount*, written at roughly the same time as *The Ambassadors*, which puts perspective itself into motion in a manner that mirrors the point-of-view shots that Smith was essentially inventing 90 miles away at the time James was
writing the novel. But rather than make this argument fully, I want to back up and place James’s turn to this mode in a broader perspective. For I see this moment, the moment where James’s imagination and that of the early movies coming together on common ground, to the making of beautiful and brilliant illusions that challenge the very order of the empirical world as we see and experience it. As such, and it’s not in the only way, James’s mind-blowing fantasy of the painted landscape setting itself in motion is similar not only to Méliès, Smith et al, but also to Benjamin’s embrace of the phantasmagorical work of the movies, his almost apocalyptic celebration of exploding our sense of the real in order to reveal unimagined realities in it.

But James doesn’t unleash the full Benjamin on us. James may differ from brother or his pragmatist peers in turning illusion to its own end—of detaching illusion from the question of the real, à la Méliès; but he’s like them in subjecting the illusion, at the end of the passage, to the discipline of the real, and to the logic of its disillusion, as Strether abandons Paris in order to return to a much more attenuated experience back in Woolett, Massachusetts. Where does this leave him? And where does it leave us? With I think a paradoxical formulation, made sharpest and most clear at the end of the novel, where Strether returns home rather than accept the invitation of Maria Gostrey to stay in Europe share her life, despite his knowledge that Mrs. Newsome will now cast him aside. There are many ways to read this conclusion and its final, ambiguous words: “well, there we are,” as if we were somewhere, rather than suspended in space between Paris and America and in time between failed mission and inevitable punishment. Another way of talking about that space is to say that its one suspended somewhere between illusion and
reality—that for Strether to stay in Europe is to attempt to turn the former into the latter, to live in the picture that he can only imagine to enter, to make real the illusion that he has been bedeviled by, only to find out banal it can be. In the end, James affirms what brother William would call the cash value of illusions themselves: or as Maria puts it, while he may lose Mrs. Newsome, “with your wonderful impressions you'll have got a great deal”—note the Williamsque pun in that last word, as a sense of amplitude and that of the bargain combine to make Maria affirm Strether's choice as one of imaginative economics. Strether's choice to leave allows him to preserve his experience of Europe as precisely a memory, an image, or an optical illusion that he can fully embrace and enjoy but only if they are maintained as such. If this sidesteps the problems of truth in the welter of visual appearances that bedeviled and obsessed his contemporaries, this is only to suggest that, at this moment in his career, in accepting his own gulling, in embracing in fact his own illusionary experience, Lambert Strether willingly joins the cavalcade of rubes, marks, and false spectators that Leja reminds us congregated in the urban metropolis suffused with new and old forms of visual illusion making. Strether's acceptance of his own visual gulling places him, alongside Millie Theale and Isobel Archer—but not most assuredly not Maggie Verver—as a sublime illustration of the dictum of another Jamesian contemporary, P.T. Barnum that “there's a sucker born every minute”—and an unwitting illustration of the perspective which visual studies scholars from Munsterberg through Laura Mulvey have taken on the media that surround us, that that sucker will enjoy nothing so much as a lifetime spent at the movies.