

**Lust of the Eyes: The Anti-Modern Critique of Visual Culture at the Paris  
*Expositions universelles, 1855-1900***

*Elizabeth M. L. Gralton*

In 1867, the writer Victor Fournel invited the readership of the Catholic journal *Le Correspondant* to ascend the staircase leading up to the Trocadéro on the Right Bank of the Seine, to turn, and to look out over the Iéna Bridge toward the Champ de Mars on Paris' Left Bank. "This" he wrote, "is what you will see before you:"

A muddle of flagpoles, of streamers, of banners, of spires, of scaffolding, of columns, of steam vents, of wooden and iron frameworks; a jumble of domes, of minarets, of pediments, of statues, of fountains, of towers, of bandstands, of greenhouses, of chalets, of pavilions, of pagodas; a chaos of monuments and hybrid buildings, of every era and country, of every shape and for every purpose, of every style and colour, encroaching upon the bank of the Seine.<sup>1</sup>

Fournel was describing a view of Paris' second Exposition universelle, brainchild of Saint-Simonian social reformers Frédéric Le Play and Michel Chevalier. Fournel's perception of the Exposition, however, was a far cry from what those two men had envisioned for the event. The chaos and visual confusion that the journalist saw manifested in the Exposition grounds contrasted sharply with the ultimate aims of the organisers: didacticism and enlightenment.

---

Elizabeth Gralton received her PhD in 2014. She is currently teaching in History and French Studies at the University of Western Australia. She gratefully acknowledges the support of the Alison Patrick Memorial Scholarship without which her attendance at the 2012 George Rudé Seminar would not have been possible. She also wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for their supportive and constructive comments.

<sup>1</sup> Victor Fournel, "Voyage à travers l'Exposition universelle: notes d'un touriste," *Le Correspondant* (April 1867): 969-970. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

The Parisian Expositions have been the subject of much scholarly attention but, thus far, their potential to illuminate the counter-discourses of late nineteenth-century France has been underexploited. The goal of this paper is to identify and interrogate the gap between the aims of the Expositions and commentaries, like Fournel's, on the highly visual emphasis of the Expositions. These events, held under the Second Empire in 1855 and 1867 and under the Third Republic in 1878, 1889 and 1900,<sup>2</sup> can be considered as a series of apotheoses of a larger nineteenth-century phenomenon that has been variously described as an exhibitionary mentality, aesthetic or complex. This phenomenon, a continuation of Enlightenment practices of classification and cataloguing, was characterised by its emphasis on comprehensiveness and on knowledge through visual display.

Fournel, in his description of the 1867 *Exposition universelle* cited above, was arguably employing an exhibitionary aesthetic in order to subvert the Exposition ideal of clarity of vision, rational classification and public instruction. Fournel's technique of itemising, in interminable lists (the above is but one example to be found in his commentaries), the various architectural elements of the Exposition does not have clarity and comprehensiveness as its goal but rather seeks to paint a picture of confusion and chaos. This paper will demonstrate that Fournel was just one example within a body of critics who saw the visual culture of the Expositions as a worrying symptom of their modernity and who attempted to subvert or deflate the exhibitionary mentality. These critics were engaged in an elitist intellectual tradition, traced by James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger in their introduction to *Modernity and Mass culture*, that repudiated visual culture based on the assumption that "highest values adhere to that which is invisible, to ideas and ideals."<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, most of the commentary discussed in this paper is to be found in right-wing, Catholic periodicals ranging from the extremist *La Libre Parole* to the comparatively moderate *La Gazette de France*. To journalists from these publications, an emphasis on the visual was evidence of a culture of the masses who understood and cared about only that which is visible and material to the detriment of a spiritual, meaningful and intellectual life.

As shall be seen, these critics attempted to deflate the Expositions' aims by demonstrating that instead of enlightening or instructing, the events instead dazzled, deceived and seduced. The exhibitionary insistence on comprehensiveness resulted in an astonishing accumulation of objects which seemed to privilege the eye over the mind and to value things over ideas. Such an accumulation seemed to commentators to be overwhelming and baffling rather than enlightening. In addition to their dazzling nature, the Expositions also manifested the tendency of modern mass production to deceive the eye and place a higher value on the superficial appearance of something than on its inherent significance. The theme among critics of modernity was that this recourse to illusion had the effect of producing an aesthetic completely devoid of historical meaning and therefore "illegible." It was felt, furthermore, that the exhibitionary emphasis on pleasing the eye, particularly during the Third Republic Expositions, was a strategy of

---

<sup>2</sup> A sixth *Exposition universelle* was also held in Paris in 1937.

<sup>3</sup> James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger, "Introduction: six artistic cultures," in *Modernity and Mass Culture*, ed. James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger (Bloomington, Ind., 1991), 3.

governmentality, one that aimed to seduce the masses—supposedly susceptible to visual distractions—into political complacency.

By the second half of the century the drive, ushered in by the Enlightenment, to categorise, catalogue, label and exhibit had come to bear on the urban environment. As demonstrated by Philippe Hamon, the architecture of the new department stores, museums and exhibition spaces of nineteenth-century Paris embodied the notion of an ideal modern society that aimed to “arrive at a total elucidation of the real” and that perceived “its surroundings as a series of juxtaposed spectacles or a collection susceptible to comfortable visual inspection.”<sup>4</sup> Museums and libraries, once tasked with projecting the wealth, influence and eccentricities of their owners, became, in the nineteenth century, subject to “the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes.”<sup>5</sup> The Exposition universelle was the spectacular epitome of this panoramic gaze, writes Lieven de Cauter; it was the “panorama of panoramas.”<sup>6</sup>

This exhibitionary mentality or aesthetic also played a role of mediator between government and governed. The Expositions, as part of what Tony Bennett has called the exhibitionary complex, were a “response to the problem of order”<sup>7</sup>; they sought to mould the populace into a citizenry by making accessible to the public the sort of knowledge that would help them to regulate themselves. This acquisition of knowledge via visual display was a clear manifestation of what Martin Jay calls the “ocularcentric bias” of the Enlightenment tradition which privileged experience and perception over abstract reasoning.<sup>8</sup> The fact that the 1889 Exposition universelle was presented as a gigantic *leçon de choses* (lesson of things)<sup>9</sup> exemplifies its position within a broader ideology of positivism. The *leçon de choses* was an educational policy of the Third Republic which strongly emphasised observation of physical reality with the aim of building a republican citizenry free of superstition and clericalism.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the principles behind the *leçon de choses* were not confined to Third Republic Expositions. Pieter van Wesemael, in his book *Architecture of Instruction and Delight*, argues that all nineteenth-century international exhibitions concentrated, in true Enlightenment fashion, on instructing the visitor by rationally ordering and categorising objects, ideas and even people in such a way as to entice the visitor into studying and ultimately understanding what they were seeing. “Almost without exception,” writes van Wesemael, “the emphasis of these installations lay on the visualisation of the information or narrative to be conveyed.”<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Philippe Hamon, *Expositions: Literature and Architecture in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. Katia Sainson-Frank and Lisa Maguire (Berkeley, 1992), 73, 79.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16:1 (1986): 24.

<sup>6</sup> Lieven de Cauter, “The Panoramic Ecstasy: on World Exhibitions and the Disintegration of Experience,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 10 (1993): 5.

<sup>7</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London, 1995), 62.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, 1993), 84-85.

<sup>9</sup> Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, “Florilège des sociétés industrielles,” in *Le Livre des Expositions universelles, 1851-1989*, ed. Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs (Paris, 1983), 279.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Kahn, *La Leçon de choses: naissance de l'enseignement des sciences à l'école primaire* (Villeneuve d'Ascq, 2002), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Pieter van Wesemael, *Architecture of Instruction and Delight: a Socio-Historical Analysis of World Exhibitions as a Didactic Phenomenon (1798-1851-1970)* (Rotterdam, 2001), 23.

Yet to a reader of the Parisian press the overwhelming impression conveyed of the Expositions universelles was one of visual burden rather than illumination. Comparisons between the Expositions and the unimaginable riches of *Arabian Nights* abound in newspaper articles of the time. An optical vocabulary, employing references to the eye, the retina, illusions and visions, was frequently recruited by journalists to stress the predominantly visual nature of the events. In many accounts, the visual was emphatically linked to idle pleasure, as can be seen in a column written for the Catholic Assumptionists' newspaper, *Le Pèlerin*, in 1878. The writer of this particular piece was commenting on the design of the Exposition building of the Trocadéro, the raised section of land directly facing the Champ de Mars on the Right Bank, in front of which a series of decorative waterfalls and fountains had been constructed. Of this watery spectacle the journalist wrote, "the precious Trocadéro waterfall will cost millions to serve only as pleasure for the eyes, *concupiscentia oculorum*."<sup>12</sup> This last Latin phrase, translated as "lust of the eyes," provides a basis on which to further explore critiques of exhibitionary visual culture and its tendency to dazzle rather than enlighten.

The phrase *concupiscentia oculorum* comes from the First Epistle of John in the New Testament which reads as follows:

Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father but is from the world.<sup>13</sup>

The concept of "the lust of the eyes" has retained some scholarly currency from its biblical origin, notably in the work of St Augustine in the fifth century and Martin Heidegger in the twentieth, both of whom can help us to understand the Catholic journalist's reaction to the waterfall at the Trocadéro. Both Augustine and Heidegger relate the *concupiscentia oculorum* to a sort of idle curiosity that assumes "seeing" as the apprehending of the world via all the bodily senses, with vision predominating.

St Augustine's premise was that "the lust of the eyes" was the longing and striving for new experiences via the physical senses and under the guise of knowledge and learning to the detriment of the spiritual self. In a post-Enlightenment world where, as Jay explains, the "sensationalist" or positivist tradition insisted upon perceptions of external objects as the only source of ideas,<sup>14</sup> St Augustine's concern about the lust of the eyes would have seemed increasingly pertinent to Exposition commentators. The view of the Expositions as visually stunning but spiritually or cerebrally malnourishing was common among critics of the Paris Expositions from their beginnings in 1855 through to 1900. At the first Exposition, for example, one commentator in legitimist newspaper *La Gazette de France* alleged that "rather than receiving a transmitted image, the public retina has instead been subjected to over-exposure; nothing has penetrated to the brain."<sup>15</sup> Half a

---

<sup>12</sup> Anon., "Exposition universelle," *Le Pèlerin*, 21 September 1878. Italics in original.

<sup>13</sup> 1 John 2: 15-16.

<sup>14</sup> Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 84.

<sup>15</sup> Jobard, "Enterrement de l'Exposition.—Résurrection probable.," *La Gazette de France*, 1 December 1855.

century later, another Catholic journalist intimated that the Exposition of 1900 had “spoken to the eyes of men rather than to their heart.”<sup>16</sup> Repeatedly, the word *éblouir*, to dazzle, was employed to describe the relationship between the eye and the vast array of objects on display at the Expositions. The point was to emphasise that these purportedly didactic events communicated as far as the eyes, but not as far as the mind. After all, if one is dazzled by a light, the eyes have been affected, but no image has filtered through to the brain. As one journalist wrote in 1855, “the sparkle of the Exposition is dazzling [...] but one has difficulty seeing when dazzled.”<sup>17</sup>

Heidegger's use of the concept of *concupiscentia oculorum* was in relation to his discussion of curiosity in *History of the concept of time*, where he argued,

curiosity appresents something solely *in order to have seen it*, that is, in order to be able to proceed again and again from what is thus seen to the next. [...] In other words, the non-tarrying of curiosity is basically concerned with not having to get involved and with merely being entertained by the world.<sup>18</sup>

Curiosity, in the sense in which both St Augustine and Heidegger understood it, is less about a quest for understanding and more about superficial encounters with the world via the senses. It is this kind of seeing that critics of the Expositions reacted against. G. D'Azambuja, writing for the ultramontane Catholic newspaper *L'Univers* in 1900, described the Exposition visitor in a way which corresponds to Heidegger's notion of the “non-tarrying” characteristic of curiosity. In the article, entitled “Tout voir” (To see all), he described a generic visitor who had set off to the Exposition with the aim of doing precisely that: see everything. The visitor, he argued, was motivated less by a desire to learn than by curiosity or, more frequently still, by a need to be able to report that he had seen everything. According to D'Azambuja's observations, the Exposition visitor was forced to proceed in a particular combination of fast and slow movements: having to move quickly to see everything, not being able to run for fear of not seeing things properly, and not being able to stop for fear of seeing something too well and therefore not being able to see something else.<sup>19</sup>

Critics often argued that the overall effect of the visually dazzling Expositions was stultifying rather than enlightening. Not only could the brain not process and understand everything there was to see, but it lost all sense of discernment. The retina, wrote D'Azambuja, after a day at the Exposition, “is no more impressed by the appearance of a masterpiece than it is by the sight of the balcony or the gutter that one sees every day from one's own home.”<sup>20</sup> It would almost seem that the Expositions forced upon people a *new* way of seeing (or of not seeing) that was symptomatic of modernity. Benjamin Gastineau, writing for the *Révue libérale* in 1867, certainly seemed to think so. In response to the Exposition of that year, he wrote of a modern world in which one was

---

<sup>16</sup> Edouard Alexandre, “Le testament de l'Exposition,” *L'Univers*, 21 October 1900.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Gouraud, “Causeries philosophiques sur l'Exposition (V): la France à l'Exposition,” *L'Assemblée nationale*, 18 July 1855.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington, Ind., 1985), 277. Italics in original.

<sup>19</sup> G. D'Azambuja, “Tout voir,” *L'Univers*, 11 June 1900.

<sup>20</sup> D'Azambuja, “Tout voir.”

forced to live rapidly and superficially, to “take in many things all at once.”<sup>21</sup> Fournel described the insatiable curiosity manifest at the Expositions as the defining characteristic of the century.<sup>22</sup>

“Curiosity,” wrote D’Azambuja in “Tout voir,” “is nothing more than a degeneration of the instinct for truth.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, just as the visual culture of the Expositions aimed to *dazzle* the eye through its sheer volume of accumulated objects, it also relied on *deceiving* the eye. One aspect of the visual culture of the Expositions that caused consternation was their tendency to produce illusions. The importance of the *trompe-l’œil* in nineteenth-century popular culture is illustrated in Vanessa Schwartz’s *Spectacular Realities*, which recounts the heyday of the panorama popular at both the 1889 and the 1900 Expositions.<sup>24</sup> One of the 1889 panoramas, *Le Tout Paris*, was designed by Charles Castellani to represent a scene of contemporary Parisian celebrities gathered around the *Opéra*. Castellani encountered various financial restraints during the installation of the panorama with the result that many of the usual techniques employed by panoramas to achieve optical illusions had to be foregone. Schwartz quotes Castellani as saying, “We had neither accessories, nor false terrains, nor any of the things that are absolutely indispensable for producing what the public likes: *trompe l’œil* and illusion.”<sup>25</sup> Castellani’s statement attests to the fact that *trompe l’œil*, the deceiving of the eye, was an integral element of nineteenth-century popular culture.

Criticisms of visual deception at the Expositions were actually directed not so much at the explicit demonstration of illusion as entertainment but at the ways in which the Expositions manifested illusion and falsity as characteristic of modern life. The Exposition sites, designed as they were to be temporary and as showcases for modern industrial techniques, were both constructed from and displayed within their grounds, structures and products built from materials intended to deceive the eye into thinking it was viewing traditional, expensive, labour-intensive, and hence prestigious, architectural materials. This pervasive falsity worried many writers, such as Léon Gautier writing in 1867 on the ecclesiastical displays at the Exposition. Gautier’s overriding concern with the works on display was their attempt to imitate historical styles without showing any integrity of their own. One issue was the use of what he called *similipierre* (imitation stone) in the construction of a church altar. This altar was to be found in a sort of display chapel in the Exposition’s park that the author was quick to point out was not consecrated and held no sacred significance; it was merely a way of displaying objects of the Catholic religion in an “authentic” setting. He emphasised the pervasive falsity present at the Exposition by commenting that if this altar had been in the main galleries (instead of in the false chapel) it could very well have been “placed between a *simili* stone Venus and a *simili* marble mantelpiece.”<sup>26</sup>

Gautier was making the point that not just this particular altar, but indeed much of the merchandise at the Expositions was pretending to be made out of something it was

---

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Gastineau, “Critique de l’exposition universelle de Paris,” *Revue libérale* 2:8 (1867): 560.

<sup>22</sup> Fournel, “Voyage à travers l’Exposition universelle,” 987.

<sup>23</sup> D’Azambuja, “Tout voir.”

<sup>24</sup> Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Berkeley, 1998), 149-176.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Castellani, cited by Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 167. Schwartz’s translation.

<sup>26</sup> Léon Gautier, “L’Exposition universelle de 1867,” *Le Monde*, 27 May 1867.

not. The altar itself, he remarked, which aspired to be Gothic, from the thirteenth century, had been constructed using false art and was therefore devoid of any sort of stylistic integrity. His argument was that the nineteenth century, with its new techniques of mass production, could make things that looked real, but that such things lacked internal truth, what Walter Benjamin would have called “aura.”<sup>27</sup> Later in the century Gautier was joined in his use of the prefix “simili” by Sibylle Riquetie de Mirabeau, or “Gyp,” who, writing in the extreme right-wing *La Libre Parole*, described the 1900 Exposition as consisting chiefly of “simili bronze, simili stone, simili everything!”<sup>28</sup> The same year writer Remy de Gourmond wrote that the prevailing architectural style at the Exposition was the “simili” style. “There are some wonders of fakery at the Exposition,” he wrote, “And the effect is completely Chinese,”<sup>29</sup> emphasising, through the pejorative use of the adjective *chinois*, that the Exposition architecture lacked coherence and meaning.

As the majority of the Exposition buildings were designed to be temporary, they themselves tended to be constructed from cheap, easy-to-use materials that could quickly generate a sense of imposing grandeur and then be easily disposed of after the six months or so of the Exposition were over. Detractors of the Expositions criticised not only the use of such materials to build the Expositions, but also what they represented in a world that they felt was becoming increasingly falsified. The relationship between depth of meaning and new architectural techniques is tackled by Philippe Hamon in *Expositions*. He writes that exhibitionary techniques, the transformation of everything into a spectacle, meant that the city was “no longer seen as a legible space which history has progressively layered into strata of patina.”<sup>30</sup> Hamon argues that the increasing use in the late nineteenth century of materials that were essentially cosmetic – that covered or concealed – were seen by critics as platitudinous, hollow and devoid of the sort of meaning that history could imprint onto traditional building materials.<sup>31</sup> The increasing illegibility of architecture concerned Exposition critics who could presumably sense that the exhibitionary aesthetic threatened to cross the frontier separating Exposition and urban reality.

For many writers, materials such as pasteboard, plaster and cement were a thin facade of grandeur to veil an inherent lack of integrity in modern production. Léon Aubineau, writing in 1889, deplored his epoch's tendency to democratise industry, to “replace the solidity and integrity of crafted objects, with what they call *trompe-l'œil*.”<sup>32</sup> His particular *bête noire* was *carton-pâte*, or pasteboard, which had been used in statuary since the first Exposition and had since found its way into everyday life in the form of cheap, mass-produced luxuries decorating bourgeois apartments. “Moulded pasteboard,” he wrote, “has everywhere replaced the delicate work of skilled and intelligent craftsmanship; it has destroyed the wood carving profession.”<sup>33</sup> Witnessing the creation of the 1867 Exposition, Victor Fournel described it as consisting of a frail skeleton of

---

<sup>27</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On some motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt trans. Harry Zorn (London, 1999), 184.

<sup>28</sup> Gyp, “On demande un veau!,” *La Libre Parole*, 29 April 1900.

<sup>29</sup> Remy de Gourmond, “Revue du mois,” *Mercure de France* 36:131 (1900): 454.

<sup>30</sup> Hamon, *Expositions*, 28.

<sup>31</sup> Hamon, *Expositions*, 139-142.

<sup>32</sup> L. Aubineau, “Paris, 2 juin 1889,” *L'Univers*, 3 June 1889. Italics in original.

<sup>33</sup> Aubineau, “Paris, 2 juin 1889.”

wood underneath a layer of plaster, destined, with the help of a decorator, to be transformed into a palace of marble and gold.<sup>34</sup> Maurice Talmeyr, writing for the same journal in 1900 as he watched the Exposition for the following year being constructed, called it a “city of paste-board and plaster, of mud and tow,<sup>35</sup> of glue and bits of wood.”<sup>36</sup> The popularity of cheap, easy-to-use, easy-to-demolish materials was evidence, according to Talmeyr, of a society obsessed with décor and outward appearance. The whole Exposition was merely ornamentation, a “sort of illusion brought to life, a gaudy nightmare straight from the brain of a unhinged nation.”<sup>37</sup>

The metaphor of illusion that was used to describe individual items and buildings on display at the Expositions was extended to Expositions as a whole. Just as Talmeyr labelled the 1900 Exposition a vision, a writer for *La Croix* (another Assumptionist newspaper) dubbed its 1889 equivalent “*the most immense trompe-l’œil* that has ever existed.”<sup>38</sup> One preoccupation of this mode of critique was to highlight the seductive function of the Exposition. The notion of the Exposition as mirage or illusion was particularly prevalent in commentaries written during the Expositions of the Third Republic; such commentaries sought to critique republican attempts to seduce the people with a false sense of well-being and affluence. As an institution of Bennett’s “exhibitionary complex” of the nineteenth century, the *Exposition universelle* can be described as a vehicle “for inscribing and broadcasting messages of power [...] throughout society.”<sup>39</sup> The spectacles of the Expositions both conveyed existing power and were part of a process of the continued seeking of legitimacy. As such, critics of republicanism saw the splendors of the Expositions as a republican quest to win over and dazzle the populace into complacency by exploiting its fondness for visual spectacle.

Such a quest seemed particularly salient at the Exposition of 1878, a watershed year in the consolidation of republicanism. In the years following the founding of the Third Republic, the National Assembly had been dominated by royalists and bonapartists; it was not until the elections of 1877 that republicans achieved a majority in the Chamber of Deputies. During 1878 they were still awaiting their final victory; royalists continued to control the Senate and would do so until the following year. Commentary surrounding the 1878 Exposition was therefore particularly politically fraught. On the one hand, the event was billed as the manifestation of French rehabilitation following the debacles of 1870-71, proof that a republican government was the most appropriate for overseeing the rebuilding of France. Critics disagreed, seeing the Exposition not as a sign of regeneration but as a decoy to draw attention away from the lost provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. An article by ardent legitimist Jean-Joseph-François Poujoulat in the legitimist *Union* accused the Republic of using the spectacle of the Exposition to convince the world that France’s recovery was complete. The republican style of maintaining dignity in the face of misfortune, of grieving for the lost provinces, lamented Poujoulat, was paradoxically to immerse the capital in a spectacle of electric lights, fireworks, bunting

---

<sup>34</sup> Fournel, “Voyage à travers l’Exposition universelle,” 964.

<sup>35</sup> *Étoupe* (tow) is a coarse fibre used mainly for stuffing or caulking seams in wooden boats.

<sup>36</sup> M. Talmeyr, “Notes sur l’Exposition,” *Le Correspondant* 199:2 (25 April 1900), 397.

<sup>37</sup> Talmeyr, “Notes sur l’Exposition,” 397.

<sup>38</sup> Réac-le-Sade, “Le Grand Trompe-l’œil,” *La Croix*, 1 July 1889. Italics in original.

<sup>39</sup> Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 61.

and gaily lit boats on the lakes of the Bois de Boulogne.<sup>40</sup> He accused the Exposition of satisfying the fickle French people's need for spectacle, writing, "they know nothing of the long-term nor of great undertakings, but they are always willing to go wherever there is pageantry or wherever the eyes will be dazzled."<sup>41</sup> Poujoulat's dissatisfaction not only with the Exposition, but with the French people themselves, was typical of the anti-modern critic who saw mass culture as an indicator of decline and the Expositions as having a significant influence in the perpetuation of this "new" and superficial French culture.

Critique of the republican use of visual display as a seductive technique continued throughout the rest of the nineteenth century. As one of the most visually exciting attractions of the Exposition of 1889, the illuminated fountains on the Champ de Mars became a symbol of the republican attempts to win over the French people. These fountains, lit up at night with different coloured lights, were a sort of aqueous fireworks display, a modern-day show of courtly splendour. A journalist for the populist Catholic paper *La Croix* wrote a column accusing the republican ministers of intending to win over the provincial visitors to the Exposition. "MM Carnot, Tirard, Constans, Rouvier and Thévenet," he wrote, referring to the President of the Republic, Marie François Sadi Carnot, and four ministers, "gaze at the illuminated fountains and exclaim: How wonderful! This will wipe away the past and save the regime."<sup>42</sup>

These illuminated fountains of 1889 receive some attention from historian Pascal Ory in his book *Une Nation pour mémoire*. He argues that the statuary of the fountains and their attempt to allegorically represent such things as "Night attempting to hold back the spirit of Light who is endeavouring to illuminate the Truth"<sup>43</sup> likely went unnoticed by most visitors and that their true symbolism came into effect at nightfall when their huge jets of water were lit up with multicoloured lights. What better way to plead the cause of democracy as the inevitable outcome of Enlightenment progress, asks Ory, than to provide, every night, such an astonishing spectacle?<sup>44</sup> Some spectators refused to be impressed. The Expositions were often seen as being a vehicle for political manipulation, and indeed the governmental rhetoric surrounding the Expositions was unequivocal. According to opening ceremony speeches, the triumph of Expositions was proof that the Republicans were the best people to govern France. This attitude riled anti-republican critics who argued that the Expositions should be seen as French achievement rather than a Republican one, and their irritation coloured their perceptions of visual displays such as the *fontaines lumineuses*. They saw this visual culture as both a seduction and a distraction from more pressing issues. One journalist wrote in the legitimist *La Gazette de France* that "We should not limit ourselves to the superficial and convince ourselves that the charms of the Eiffel Tower, the brightness of the illuminated fountains [...] should

---

<sup>40</sup> Jean-Joseph-François Poujoulat, *L'Union*, 29 June 1878.

<sup>41</sup> Jean-Joseph-François Poujoulat, *L'Union*, 2 May 1878.

<sup>42</sup> Le Moine, "Purgation," *La Croix*, 8 July 1889.

<sup>43</sup> Ory is referring here to the fountain designed by sculptor Francis de Saint-Vidal entitled *La Nuit essayant d'arrêter le génie de la Lumière qui s'efforce d'éclairer la Vérité*.

<sup>44</sup> Pascal Ory, *Une nation pour mémoire: 1889, 1939, 1989: trois jubilés révolutionnaires* (Paris, 1992), 106-107.

completely occupy public attention.”<sup>45</sup> His point was that France's woes could not be compensated for by a giant tower and some coloured water.

In 1900, journalist for *La Libre Parole*, E. Cravoisier, visited the *Palais des Illusions*, situated within the *Palais de l'Electricité*. Apparently impressed by what he saw there, Cravoisier described the spectacular visual delights resulting from an ingenious manipulation of coloured lights and mirrors. He wrote of an enchanting scene in which gold oozed and flames of colour danced, glimmered and gleamed. Yet the *Palais des Illusions* was too obvious a metaphor for Cravoisier to pass up. In spite of his evident enjoyment of the spectacle, it presented him with a perfect analogy of republicanism as he saw it. In response to the wonders of the light show, the audience, according to Cravoisier, showed their immense enthusiasm by crying out, applauding and stamping their feet in praise of what he described as a dazzling fairyland. And yet their joy was short-lived. As soon as the lights were turned off, the illusions died, and the shadows reappeared; the crowd “who had been allowed momentary access to a dreamworld”<sup>46</sup> was forced back into banal reality, the symbolism of which Cravoisier pounced upon. At the Exposition, he wrote, you cannot believe in anything, any more than you can believe in the elegant speeches of the Millerands, the Picards and the Loubets of the world. He was referring here to the three men who had made speeches at the opening ceremony for the Exposition of 1900: Alexandre Millerand, Minister for Commerce and Industry; Alfred Picard, Commissioner General of the Exposition; and Émile Loubet, President of the Republic.

\* \* \*

The visual splendor of the Expositions, their focus on dazzling, deceiving and seducing, left many commentators worried about what was to come when the events closed. There is a sense of impending doom in many of the articles about the Expositions spanning the second half of the nineteenth century, a sense that when the mirage had evaporated, the decline and decay of France would be revealed. Reflecting on the close of the 1878 Exposition, *Le Français* compared it to a theatre after the show had finished: what had once been a kingdom of noisy brilliance was replaced by darkness, dust and silence. The theatre workers wearily cover the seats with ugly grey canvas, the sets descend with a crash, and the extras, stripped of their finery, disappear, shivering, into the darkness. The spectacle, according to *Le Français*, had for a moment consumed the senses, but ultimately left one saddened by the vanity of its fictions. The end product of such festivals was a sentiment of emptiness, of disappointment and of a little disgust, argued *Le Français*; “the time has come when they can no longer dazzle the public with fireworks and overwhelm them with oratory.”<sup>47</sup>

Critics of the visual culture of the Expositions were attacking more than the extravagances of isolated events. The critique of the visual contains within it a fundamentally elitist response to mass culture. Donald Lowe argues that the dominance of the visual from the eighteenth century onwards was part and parcel of the “ideal that

---

<sup>45</sup> Charles Dupuy, “Paris, 17 juin,” *La Gazette de France*, 18 June 1889.

<sup>46</sup> E. Cravoisier, “Le palais des illusions,” *La Libre Parole*, 5 July 1900.

<sup>47</sup> Anon., “Paris 11 novembre 1878,” *Le Français*, 12 November 1878.

knowledge could be detached from the knower to become impartial and explicit” and which “promoted the class interests of the triumphant bourgeoisie.”<sup>48</sup> The Expositions, embodying as they did a vision of society led by an elite of engineers, industrialists and financiers,<sup>49</sup> were inherently bourgeois events; they exhibited a bourgeois world-view to which the petite bourgeoisie and the working classes could, or should, aspire. Furthermore, the Expositions were a manifestation of what Vanessa Schwartz has called a “visual representation of reality as spectacle” which helped to forge mass culture through creating “a common culture and sense of shared experiences.”<sup>50</sup> The Expositions, which represented the democratisation of knowledge via the visual and the superficial pleasure of the spectacle and the facade, seemed to critics not only an attempt to appeal to the middle-class masses, but also evidence that a bourgeois mentality and culture had come to reign over France. The response to the dazzling nature of the Expositions was a critique of the modern expository mentality according to which the world can be “known” by the display of the display of things. Critics reduced this expository mentality to a “lust of the eyes,” a modern preoccupation with sensory pleasure to the detriment of true understanding or revelation. Critics also deflated the idea that visibility went hand in hand with legibility, or meaning, by emphasising the essentially platitudinous nature of Exposition architecture and the fruits of mass production on display there. Finally, the Expositions represented, to critics of modernity, the nefarious designs of democracy to appeal to the herd-like masses and transform them, through visual spectacle, into a complacent citizenry.

---

<sup>48</sup> Donald Lowe, *History of bourgeois perception* (Chicago, 1982), 18-19.

<sup>49</sup> Pascal Ory, *Les Expositions universelles de Paris: panorama raisonné, avec des aperçus nouveaux et des illustrations par les meilleurs auteurs* (Paris, 1982), 18.

<sup>50</sup> Schwartz, *Spectacular realities*, 6.