

THEODORA TSIMPOUKI

REALISM, NARRATIVE VISUALITY AND THE HIEROGLYPHIC WORLD OF NEWLAND ARCHER

Abstract

In this paper I claim that despite Americanist realism's assumption of a disembodied narrative omniscience inseparable from an allegiance to national unity and homogeneity one attests within mainstream realism the emergence of new kinds of visual relations that disrupt an omniscient, detached and disinterested gaze. Through an analysis of the structural devices and iconography of Wharton's canonical realist text, *The Age of Innocence*, it will be shown that realism's literary production, in contradiction to its own hegemonic intent, often breaks up the "illusion of self-mirroring" revealing that behind the transcendent Cartesian observer lie embodied forms of subjectivization which, in turn, register the author's anticipation of the new social and gender relations but also her uneasiness and growing anxiety over the formation of a new national American identity.

Key words

realism in literature; vision; visuality; narrative gaze; female stereotypes; social manners

1. Realism and the scopic regimes of modernity

The dominance of the scopic regime since Descartes in the seventeenth century has been repeatedly and adequately documented to the degree that no extensive unfolding of its genealogy is here required. Suffice to remind that vision, "the noblest of senses" as it was designated by Descartes, was considered foundational in the formation of subjective rationality in philosophy, or else was thought to be the primary means of knowing the self and the world seen. Within the long Cartesian tradition, seers, and the knowers into whom they gradually evolved, were assumed to be omniscient, neutral, detached and disinterested. Moreover, "Cartesian perspectivism," according to intellectual historian Martin Jay (1988a:10) is presumed to be an "ahistorical, disinterested, disembodied, objective" vision that

offers a privileged perspective devoid of contaminating sentiment or any other factor that might bias judgment.¹

Steeped in rationalist epistemology, realism aspires to create fiction capable of mirroring reality, presumably conveying a faithful “picture” of the concrete, historical nature of human life. Stendhal’s famous dictum according to which “the novel is a mirror carried along the highway”² inaugurated the intense interest in observation, and explicitly in seeing, that mostly characterizes the realist novel of the second half of the 19th century. In order for verisimilitude to be achieved, the observer ought to capture reality as it actually is, as if placing a mirror in front of the world and relying on the transparency of the linguistic medium to transcribe its reflection. In search for this unmediated “Real,” realism in philosophy and fiction has given predominance to visual perception which becomes the basis of all knowing.

However, such privileging of the observing subject whose scrutinizing gaze has the capacity to deliver uncontested knowledge has proved to be an epistemologically impossible task. Nietzsche was the first to theorize on the partiality and contingency of vision: If the world around us is perspective-dependent, then, according to the philosopher’s famous aphorism, “facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations” (Pojman 1998:1015–16).³ Recent scholarship has revived interest in the realist aesthetic while at the same time it questioned its access to reality, emphasizing instead its complicity with power and the marketplace. Starting with Amy Kaplan, a number of critics have succinctly argued on the changing correlations between culture and society and the way the realist novel sought to “participate in and inform the changing modes of interplay and communication between the two” (Weimann 1990: 190). According to these critical views, realist writers of the fin-de-siècle tend to repudiate “largely unchallenged and broadly accepted norms of social ideology and sexual morality” (Weimann 1990: 191). Moreover, recent literary criticism has shown how ideological preconceptions and valorisations of form influence not only a writer’s sense of realism but also the representations of realism. Hence, the resulting strains and uncertainties in literary authorship can be traced in the questioning of the traditional modes of narrative visual representation which naively assumed the equation of seeing with believing, of vision with reality. Any attempt to render life as it is, to sustain the “illusion of self-mirroring” only exposes the “real” as fraught with contradictions. Such complexity within what has come to be regarded as canonical realist literature, points toward the fact that realism’s literary production, in contradiction to its own hegemonic intent, often calls into question the equation between subjective and objective reality by challenging the Cartesian observer’s authority and detachment, revealing him (note that the gender of the observer is rarely female) to be intricately implicated within a visual relationship with his/her observed Other which is dynamic, dialogic, indeterminate and, *a priori*, culturally constructed.

In what follows, I want to discuss Edith Wharton’s particularly ambivalent relationship to the seeming stability and transparency of the realist’s disinterested

narrative gaze and a presumably equally stable and transparent world which the narrator seeks to represent. By examining the narrator's "gaze," the visual metaphors and iconography that pervade *The Age of Innocence*, I wish to register a literary "moment of unease"⁴ within the history of representation of the gaze and its social and cultural underpinnings. I argue that if realism is predicated on the notion that seeing is knowing, equating sight to cognition, then, Wharton manipulates her narrator's point of view exposing it as inadequate and flawed in order to draw attention to the rapid changes in the social and ideological climate of early twentieth century America. While avoiding what she called the "'Wuthering Depths' of the new school of fiction" (qtd in Wegener 2000: 117), Wharton endows her narrator with a privileged viewpoint only to undermine his authority when his defected vision causes him to seriously misread the cultural text of social interaction and interpersonal relations and proves him unprepared for the "ephemeral, shifting" new world (Wharton 1996: 157).

Wharton is by no means the only American realist who employs such a perspectival shift, nor is she the only one who manipulates the single authoritative perspective in order to expose the limits of perception and problematize established notions about knowing and their cultural conditioning. Other major American realist writers like William Dean Howells and Henry James could be said to have articulated in their narrative the same distrust in omniscient narration: from Howells whose defence of realist omniscience results in the democratization of visuality, to Henry James whose multiplication of narrative visual centres precipitates realist renegotiation of objective knowledge and sovereign power, all three realist writers register in their work a crisis of confidence in the act of seeing and a confrontation with the situated confines of the visual, which in turn reflects a deeper epistemological crisis in ways of perceiving and communicating with the changing world around them. While the degree of cognizance in their employment of representational strategies varies, as differ the philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings of the conclusions drawn by each author, the "flawed" presentation of narrative "vision" which oscillates between interpretative excess and displacement of observational agency, indicates a breaking up with the traditional rendering of the realist gaze as "monocular" and the world it depicts as socially harmonious and homogeneous.

Because of lack of space, I will focus on the relation between novelistic narrative and visual acts in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, a text in which narration is intricately linked to visual phenomena. I would like to submit that the author's preoccupation with visual terminology underscores a more profound anxiety that has to do with a waning confidence in her own upper-class assumptions and with a certain urgency to come to terms with the changing gender and social roles of a society itself in transition. In conflating her narrator's seeing with failure to see, his perception with blindness, his knowing with not knowing, Wharton satirically undermines normative assumptions of male rational, disinterested perspective and capacity of understanding, as well as masculine competence and mastery of the social code. At the same time, she depicts social relations between genders as dy-

dynamic and unresolved, with women becoming involved in the formation of a new social ethics and morality that surpass the confines of domesticity. Finally, *The Age of Innocence* is a realist novel with a twist: written in France and published in 1920, at a place and a time when modernism prevailed, Wharton nevertheless employs what she deemed “old-fashioned” narrative methods in order to criticize the cultural ratification of the privileged class of which she was a member.⁵ Although it is well known that Wharton exhibited a resistance to both modernity and literary modernism⁶ in her retrospective survey of American culture she adopts a sceptical approach questioning the viability and flexibility of the social and cultural establishment in relation to the changing world. Wharton’s critical glance emerges in the novel in the discrepancy between Archer’s presumed all-encompassing vision and the real world, the world as it has become, or as Madame Olenska puts it the “things as they are” (240). In this respect, *The Age of Innocence* can be read as a cultural and ideological link between 1870s New York and early twentieth century America, expanding the dialogue on gender and identity issues within the shifting contours of modernity in the US.

Although there have been many book-length studies which examine the primacy of the visual in literature, and quite a few among them which have focused on the “crisis in ocularcentrism,” to use a Jay Martin phrase, this assault in the predominance of the visual has been explored as ideologically concomitant and historically overlapping with either the modernist or the postmodernist period.⁷ While I fully endorse those critics’ engagement with visuality and visual transgressions, I find vision’s gradual erosion as emphatically beginning in the realist period rather than later on. The difference in periodization of visual strategies of representation is not a simple matter of chronology: rather, it is against the historical dominance of and hegemonic faith in disembodied narrative omniscience that the value of transgressive vision – what Raymond Williams calls the “emergent” or “residual” – can be assessed. Finally, my focus on the epistemological attitudes of viewing adopted by the realists is based on the premise of the contingency between the social world and literary representation. There is a connection, I suggest, between the gradual surrender of the traditional form of narrative representation and visual rhetoric and the larger constellation of social and ideological change at the turn of 19th century. As Amy Kaplan (1988) puts it, the realism that develops in American fiction “is not a seamless package of a triumphant bourgeois mythology but an anxious and contradictory mode which both articulates and combats the growing sense of unreality at the heart of middle-class.” “This unreal quality,” the critic goes on to say, comes from “intense and often violent class conflicts” on one hand, and “the simultaneous development of a mass culture” on the other (9). In Kaplan’s investigation of social tension and material culture as the foreground of the narrative structure of realist texts, I would add the accelerating impact of visual technologies, in particular photography, which not only altered the ways in which perception was conceptualized and produced but is responsible for conceiving and grasping the world “as picture,” to appropriate Heidegger’s phrase (1977: 129).⁸

2. The hieroglyphic world of Newland Archer

In *The Age of Innocence* Edith Wharton employs free indirect discourse that confines the reader to her protagonist's way of seeing and perceiving. In other words, Archer's gaze serves in the novel as Wharton's Jamesian centre of consciousness. In fact, as many critics have persuasively argued, the novel's rich ambiguities arise from the narrator's appropriation of Archer's perspective, *her* viewing the world through *his* eyes. In her attempt to reflect the complex, highly regulated and often stifling social reality of her childhood years, Wharton abandons the narrative posture of neutral detachment in favour of the more intensified and mediated gaze of Newland Archer. Moreover, in foregrounding her protagonist's visual perception, the author draws attention to the text's narrative voice, that is, to "the technical means or representational artifices of the work itself," and in so doing she "dishonours" – to use Fredric Jameson's term – one of the two "demands or claims" – the other being "reality" – that make possible realism's viable conception.⁹ In addition to disrupting the traditional realist narrative's gaze, Archer's delimited view unmasks not only his unreliability but also the narcissistic distortion and masculinist bias of his vision. So if, as Newland Archer reflects, Old New York is a "hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done, or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs," then, knowledge of that world is not omniscient but contingent and it relies upon the observer's masterful deciphering and successful interpretation of those signs. However, far from evincing visual and perceptual mastery, Archer's gaze is seriously contaminated by his cultural conditioning and his ambivalent relationship to the social class he arduously desires to be part of but, at the same time, to be different from, assuming a far more progressive and unconventional cultural identity.

Early in the novel and while he is watching with his opera-glasses his fiancée and the other ladies in the box, he muses over "the recognized custom" of married women "to attract masculine homage while playfully discouraging it" (10). His contentment lies in the belief that his views are shared by "all the carefully-brushed, white-waistcoated, buttonhole-flowered gentlemen" (11). Fittingly, he is embarrassed by Ellen's unorthodox behaviour and thanks "heaven that he is a New Yorker, and about to ally himself with one of his kind" (30). Yet, naïve and pompous as he is, he also fancies himself unconventional and liberal, "scornful of arbitrary constraints" (119) imposed by traditional convention-bound New York social milieu. Archer's reserve and cultural insecurity return with vengeance whenever his cosmopolitanism is put into question: "You don't like us," he retorts to Ellen when she castigates the New World's "blind conformity to tradition." "We're damnably dull. We've no character, no colour, no variety" (201). Archer's remarks register in part the contrast between Europe and America, a fictional preoccupation that Wharton shared with Henry James. Moreover, in her *French Ways and Their Meaning* Wharton undeniably celebrates French culture for its reverence, taste, intellectual honesty and continuity, qualities that, as a young nation, the US had not yet acquired (Singley 2003b).

However, in depicting the discrepancy between Archer's self-deceiving rebelliousness and his allegiance to his class and national identity, Wharton uncovers her protagonist's blindness to his own ineffectuality and lack of individual freedom. In order for Archer to be recognized as a representative of his class and national culture, he has to abide by internalized forms of self-regulation, a procedure which in fact results in an unwitting surrender of his actively shaping the events of his life to his own liking. To paraphrase Madame Olenska's insightful remark, Archer can't exercise his power "unless [he] give [it] up." In a retrospective account of his life, Archer feels compensated in having his genteel conservatism applauded by none other than Theodore Roosevelt himself. To the Governor's appeal, "You're the kind of man the country wants, Archer," fifty-seven-year-old Newland glowed with pride.

Even more significant to my attempt to delineate Wharton's deviation from the objective, disinterested narrative gaze is Archer's male blindness toward May and Ellen and both their classification into confining stereotypes in order to render them culturally transparent. As Emily J. Orlando maintains, Ellen and May:

work together to deconstruct Archer's world in ways similar to [those of] Wharton, who deflates the myth of the American woman and challenges the tradition that assigns her to types: either woman-as-artless (*ingénue*, angel, Diana, American Girl) or woman-as-artist (*femme fatale*, Madame X, dark lady, imaginary beloved). (Orlando 1998: 73)

When Archer's gaze falls on May at the opera on the night of their engagement, the spectacle of the pink-faced and fair-haired young woman, dressed in white tulle caught modestly at her breasts with a gardenia, gives him "a thrill of possessorship" as he pictures himself initiating her into the mysteries of sexuality. With swollen "masculine vanity" he marvels at her "abysmal purity" (10). Later, Archer is thrilled to find out that he can communicate his thoughts to May by simply glancing at her: "She met his glance comprehendingly... Evidently she was always going to understand" (24). He is convinced that he can penetrate "the depths of [May's] innocently-gazing soul" with his starry-eyed glance, projecting to her the knowledge he wants her to have, whereas he assumes her ignorance whenever it suits him. He thinks he can base his coherent understanding of May on what he reads as her transparent accessibility, while his visualization of her simplicity puts him in genuine male "solidarity" with the New York standards of morality that equate feminine innocence with wilful ignorance and lack of depth. Archer's observant look of May's eyes, "almost pale in their youthful limpidity" and her face wearing "the vacant serenity of a young marble athlete" (120) lead him to confidently assume that "the lines of her character, though so few, were on the same fine mould as her face" (165). The accumulation of evidence that "he would always know the thoughts" behind May's "clear brow" (246), culminates in Archer's representation of the female object of his gaze as "the subject creature" "versed in the arts of the enslaved" (255). His negative representation of

the women of his class, and in particular of May, whose “real self” could not be disengaged from “the shape into which tradition and training had moulded her” (273), elevates Archer into the position of the arch seer and knower, capable of personal growth, maturity, cultural fluency and sophistication, and in harsh juxtaposition to his wife whose “hard bright blindness” has sealed “the mind against imagination and the heart against experience” (123).

Interestingly enough, Archer’s gendered gaze is contested once in the novel when he attempts to exercise it on a large photograph of May Welland:

With a new sense of awe he looked at the frank forehead, serious eyes and gay innocent mouth of the young creature whose soul’s custodian he was to be. That terrifying product of the social system he belonged to and believed in, the young girl who knew nothing and expected everything, *looked back at him like a stranger* through May Welland’s familiar features; and once more it was borne in on him that marriage was not the safe anchorage he had been taught to think, but a voyage on uncharted seas. (emphasis added: 39–40)

I quoted this passage at some length because it seems striking how looking at May through the mediation of the photograph unsettles the dynamics between looker and his object of look. The photography resists Archer’s penetrating view, and, in its depthlessness, the image of May denies the subjective and discursive nature of the observer’s gaze. Moreover, the viewing object’s (May’s image) return of the gaze points to the precarious balance between the sovereign subject’s (Archer’s) eye and the object’s (May’s) subservience¹⁰ while it undermines Archer’s credibility and challenges untroubled and unquestioned belief in his future marital felicity. Unlike the “real” May who – under Archer’s eyes – is reduced to an appropriable object, the photographed May resists interpretation while her look back at him thoroughly unsettles and puzzles Archer.

3. Archer’s Olenska’s gaze of the Gorgon

If Archer’s controlling gaze of May relegates her to the status of a passive observer, enabling him a coherent and unambiguous understanding of her character, his gaze of Madame Olenska does not yield the same results. Although in the opening opera scene his scrutinizing gaze appropriates her as an object of visual pleasure (her “pale and serious face appealed to his fancy” [16]), he also becomes aware of what seems to him as Ellen Olenska’s difference, her foreignness and her unusualness. In contradistinction to May, Ellen emerges in Archer’s eyes, as well as in the eyes of other curious observers, as a female enigma, exotic and scandalous in her allure and manners.

Olenska’s ostensible violation of Old New York’s code of manners further intrigues the reserved Archer (Viglietta). Her puzzling identity and her seem-

ingly unaffected poise demand Archer's closer observation but her face seems impenetrable to him and her "apparent incapacity for surprise" strikes him as odd (140). He expresses the same ambivalence about her eyes: "It frightened him to think what must have gone to the making of her eyes" (55). Obviously Madame Olenska throws Archer's gaze of mastery and compulsion off balance, stimulating in him simultaneously feelings of alarm and compassion, contempt and protectiveness, aversion and fascination. If, as Carol Wershoven identifies Ellen, she is one of Wharton's "female intruders," an outsider and a cultural threat, then it is her otherness that appeals to Archer more and makes him susceptible to romantic delusion. Though the narrative alludes to Ellen's complicit role in nurturing and perpetuating a love affair with Archer,¹¹ it becomes obvious that the more his enchantment for Madame Olenska grows, the more his ability to look becomes disabled. Not only does he gradually lose his capacity to see clearly and assume control of his life but after he has misread May's discretion for naiveté,¹² he misinterprets Ellen's unorthodox behaviour as passion for his own self. In all but his first couple of encounters with Ellen, Archer is repeatedly depicted as "groping in blankness" (143), "staring into utter darkness" with his "hidden eyeballs" (144) or "pitching down headlong into darkness" from a steep precipice (147). Ironically, the more his presumably mastering position is rendered precarious and his vision of the real world becomes blurred the better he thinks he can read his lover's face exposing "her whole person, with the soul behind it." Archer stands "dumb and overwhelmed by what her face suddenly told him" as his gaze probes her inner depths (203). Self-deceptively, he assumes a coherent and intelligible communication with his beloved, where words are deemed unnecessary and redundant.

Fittingly, in nearly all of these meetings, Archer's vision conflates the performance of Dion Boucicault's *The Shaugran* with real life, and self-indulgently recreates the scene of the parting between lovers with his self and Ellen acting out the leading roles. Thus, the conventional opposition between reality and theatre is here both invoked and undermined. When, for example, he visits Ellen's "Bohemian" home which he had earlier invested with a foreign atmosphere of "romantic scenes and sentiments" and exotic scents of "some far-off bazaar" and smells made up of Turkish coffee and ambergris and dried roses" (62), Archer reveals his love and indulges in a display of passionate, fetishist worship, acting out the role of *The Shaugran's* lover: "He sat bowed over, his head between his hands, staring at the hearth-rug, and at the tip of the satin shoe that showed under her dress. Suddenly he knelt down and kissed the shoe" (145). In all instances, however, Archer's fetishizing gaze results in frustrated desire. His narcissistic indulgence in his idealistic illusion not only persists after his marriage to May, but his whole life takes on an air of unreality, impairing even more gravely his capacity to see.

If Wharton's Archer seemed initially confident about his uncontested capacity of clear sightedness, the Archer who had "a glimpse of real life" because of Ellen, that is whose looking has become an erotic experience, has now surrendered his

privileged vision of the outside world. As if blindfolded he moves in “the scene of his actual life” with a growing sense of “unreality and insufficiency, bumping against familiar prejudices and traditional points of view as an absent-minded man goes on bumping into the furniture of his own room” (220). In contrast to the unreality and irrelevancy of his actual life, the vision of Madame Olenska, more than the woman herself, takes a visceral form, “as close to him as the blood in his vein” (183). Ironically, the moment when his wilful refusal “to look at things as they are” reaches its climax is the moment when Ellen’s vision takes over: “I’ve had to look at the Gorgon” Madame Olenska says. But this direct sight of the Gorgon’s gaze does not cause “blessed” blindness, as Ellen would have preferred. On the contrary, looked at straight on, the Gorgon “fastens [people’s] eyelids open” (243). With this reversal of positions, the text parodically inscribes the dynamics involved in the gaze.¹³ Because of his intensive inclusion in the circuit of desire, Archer has lost the power of his controlling gaze which is now assumed by Ellen, who acquires a position to oversee the situation and take command (Orlando 2006). In the farewell-party scene, Archer’s gaze has lost its capacity to confer mastery over the situation. Instead, he has now become the pathetic object of his fellowmen vigilant eyes:

As his glance travelled from one placid well-fed face to another he saw all the harmless-looking people engaged upon May’s canvas-backs as a band of dumb conspirators, and himself and the pale woman on his right as the centre of their conspiracy. And then it came over him, in a vast flash made up of many broken gleams, that to all of them he and Madame Olenska were lovers. (279)

For all the power Archer’s gaze arrogates, it ends in impotence. In the remaining narrative, Archer is reduced to a passive observer who is made to suffer the consequences of his ineffectual gaze and the insufficient knowledge extreme reliance to it has brought him.

4. Sight, innocence and America as a deaf-and-dumb asylum

In concluding, I want to return to my initial remarks on spectacular relations. By attributing the narratorial look to Archer and making him the centre of consciousness of her novel, Wharton was able to expose her character’s limitations, his lack of intellectual honesty, moral courage and cultural maturity. However, Archer’s cultural misreadings are not solely his own. If Archer represents a social milieu at a historical moment then his inability to understand, to see things as they are, is a phenomenon that characterizes the social milieu he belongs to. His cultural blindness and inefficient interpretation of cultural signs illustrates the problematics of male and female identity for the twentieth century American individual and the American nation itself. “The childish memories of a long-vanished America”¹⁴

that Wharton reconstructs may convey an air of nostalgia but, most significantly, they seem to acknowledge the cultural confinements of a whole society which clang to its old-fashioned, anachronistic attitudes and evaded the responsibility of equipping its children with a “modern” American sensibility. Archer’s son, Dallas, sums it up succinctly: “You never did ask each other anything. . . . You never told each other anything. You just sat and watched each other and guessed at what was going on underneath. A deaf-and-dumb asylum” (297).

Published as late as 1920, *The Age of Innocence*, offers its author with a retrospective knowledge of an older historical reality, a past that Wharton was so familiar with as herself a product of the purebred, privileged Anglo-American society she represented. But, the America of the 1870s in which the novel is set and the America of the 1920s from the perspective of which it is represented, evidently is not the same America. *The Age of Innocence* is proof of the author’s attempts to organize the past she was fond of and the present which she distrusts into a coherent and intelligible experience. In view of the shifting social contours within America but also the country’s nascent international role, Wharton seems torn between opposing social and political views. Commenting on the author’s ambiguous stance, Nancy Bentley maintains that Wharton “exhibited neither blind nostalgia nor a consistent progressivism” (148). Similarly, Wegener notes that while Wharton described herself as a “rabid imperialist,” she nevertheless accepted expansionist consequences with reluctance (“Rabid”). “America’s sedentary days are long since past. The whole world has become a vast escalator,” she wrote in 1927 in “The Great American Novel.” “It is useless at least for the storyteller, to deplore what the new order of things has wiped out, vain to shudder at what it is creating.” Wharton deplores this “new order” which has been developed “to the deep detriment of [America’s] picturesqueness, and of many far more important things,” yet she advises her peers to accept it as inevitable.

It was my intention to show how this ambivalence informs Wharton’s aesthetic vision through her employment of a realist narratorial look. Her endowing the single narrative gaze with unlimited representational power only to expose its ineffectuality by its constant misreadings registers Wharton’s anticipation of the new social and gender relations but also her uneasiness and growing anxiety over the formation of a new national American identity. Unlike critical views that present Wharton as inattentive to narrative formal issues, this essay has attempted to demonstrate that the author’s preoccupation with visual metaphors and acts evince a deeper engagement with problems of gender, class and national identity in America in the beginning of the 20th century. After all, as Ellen has intuitively guessed presaging a whole tradition of American authors and citizens alike: “It seems stupid to have discovered America only to make it a copy of another country” (201).

Notes

- 1 The scopic regimes of modernity arise, according to Martin Jay, with the Italian Renaissance, when linear perspective became the dominant pictorial convention. See also Chris Jenks for his notion of the “centrality of the eye in Western Culture”.
- 2 Itself a quotation from Saint-Réal, the epigraph appears in chapter 13, book One of *The Red and the Black*.
- 3 “Everything is Interpretation: . . . Against those who say ‘There are only facts,’ I say, ‘No, facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations.’ We cannot establish any fact *in itself*. Perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing” (emphasis original).
- 4 “Our previous history is not the petrified block of a singular visual space, since, looked at obliquely, it can always be seen to contain its moments of unease” (Rose 1986: 232–233).
- 5 The novel follows the publication of major modernist texts (some of which Wharton must have read, an avid reader that she was, according to her biographer R. W. B. Lewis,) and precedes the *annus mirabilis* 1922, only by two years.
- 6 For her anti-modernist accounts, see Wharton’s non-fictional books *French Ways* and “The Great American Novel” but also Wegener (2000), Bauer (1994), Bentley (1995) and Singley (2003b).
- 7 For example, Karen Jacobs in *The Eye’s Mind* (a study to which I am indebted) examines modernist texts from 1900 to 1955 as spaces indicative of an “eroding faith in epistemological prerogatives for those privileged, observing subjects,” an erosion that the critic views as precipitated by the sceptical philosophical discourses of vision (i.e. psychoanalysis, Marxism, existentialist philosophy), the accelerating impact of visual technologies, such as photography and film, and the emergence of anthropology and sociology as academic disciplines (2). Similarly, Josh Cohen’s *Spectacular Allegories* explores, through a theoretical framework which fuses Walter Benjamin’s concept of allegory with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, a postmodern crisis of perceptual mastery and visual authority. Postmodern texts are characterized by an opacity and an indeterminacy which manifests itself in what the critic calls “allegorical impulse” (5) that raises the possibility to construct a new critical politics of visibility.
- 8 “‘To get the picture’ throbs with being acquainted with something, with being equipped and prepared for it. Where the world becomes picture, what is, in its entirety, is juxtaposed as that for which man is prepared and which, correspondingly, he therefore intends to bring before himself and have before himself. Hence world picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as picture” (Heidegger 1977: 129).
- 9 “‘Realism’ is a peculiarly unstable concept owing to its simultaneous, yet incompatible, aesthetic and epistemological claims, as the two terms of the slogan, “representation of reality,” suggest. These two claims then seem contradictory: the emphasis on this or that type of truth content will clearly be underestimated by any intensified awareness of the technical means or representational artifice of the work itself. Meanwhile, the attempt to reinforce and to shore up the epistemological vocation of the work generally involves the suppression of the formal properties of the realistic text and promotes an increasingly naïve and unmediated or reflective conception of aesthetic construction and reception.... Yet no viable conception of realism is possible unless both of these demands or claims are honored simultaneously, prolonging and preserving – rather than ‘resolving’ – this constitutive tension and incommensurability” (Jameson 1990: 158).
- 10 Žižek (1989), explaining Lacan’s notion of the “illusion” of subjecthood formation, says: “The eye viewing the object is on the side of the subject, while the gaze is on the side of the object. When I am looking at an object, the object is always already gazing at me, and from a

point at which I cannot see it. . . . The whole point of Lacan's argument is to oppose to the self-mirroring of philosophical subjectivity the irreducible discord between the gaze qua object and the subject's eye" (43).

- 11 Madame Olenska's complicit role is argued persuasively by Fracasso (1982) and Daigrepoint (2008).
- 12 In fact, Archer is so convincing in his negative representation of May that he beguiles a number of critics who dismiss May as an insignificant character (Ammons 1982, Kozloff 2001). However, as Fracasso (1991) explains May "is a perceptive, strong-willed, and determined woman who develops into 'a person of greater depth' than Newland Archer could ever have imagined" (43). See also Hadley (1991).
- 13 A similar argument can be traced in Newman's 'The Situation of the Looker-On'.
- 14 Quoted in Waid (2003), 'Introduction,' xiii.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Special Account for Research Grants of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.

References

- Ammons, Elizabeth (1982) 'Cool Diana and the Blood-Red Muse'. In: Fleischmann, Fritz (ed.) *American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism*. Boston: Hall, 209–24.
- Bauer, Dale M. (1994) *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Bentley, Nancy (1995) *The Ethnography of Manners: Hawthorne, James, Wharton*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Cohen, Josh (1998) *Spectacular Allegories: Postmodern American Writing and the Politics of Seeing*. London: Pluto.
- Daigrepoint, Lloyd M. (2008) 'The Cult of Passion in *The Age of Innocence*'. *American Literary Realism* 40 (1), 1–15.
- Fracasso, Evelyn, E. (1991) 'The Transparent Eyes of May Welland in Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*'. *Modern Language Studies* 21, 43–48.
- Hadley, Kathy Miller (1991) 'Ironic Structure and Untold Stories in *The Age of Innocence*'. *Studies in the Novel* 23, 262–72.
- Heidegger, Martin (1977) 'The Age of the World Picture'. In: Lovitt, William (trans.) *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. New York: Harper and Row, 115–54.
- Jacobs, Karen (2001) *The Eye's Mind. Literary Modernism and Visual Culture*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Jameson, Fredric (1990) *Signatures of the Visible*. New York: Routledge.
- Jay, Martin (1988a) 'Scopic Regimes of Modernity'. In: Foster, Hal (ed.) *Vision and Visuality*. Seattle: Bay, 3–28.
- Jay, Martin (1988b) 'The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism'. *Poetics Today* 9 (2), 307–326.
- Jenks, Chris (1995) 'The Centrality of the Eye in Western Culture: An Introduction'. In: Jenks, Chris (ed.) *Visual Culture*. London: Routledge, 1–25.
- Kaplan, Amy (1988) *The Social Construction of American Realism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kozloff, Sarah (2001) 'Complicity in *The Age of Innocence*.' *Style Journal* 35 (2) <http://www.engl.niu.edu/style/archives/vol35n2.html>
- Lewis, R.W.B. (1975) *Edith Wharton: A Biography*. New York: Harper.

- Newman, Beth (1990) "The Situation of the Looker-On": Gender, Narration, and Gaze in *Wuthering Heights*". *PMLA* 105 (5), 1029–104.
- Orlando, Emily J. (1998) "Rereading Wharton's 'Poor Archer' a Mr. 'Might-have-been' in *The Age of Innocence*." *American Literary Realism 1870–1910* 30 (2), 56–77.
- Orlando, Emily J. (2006) *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- Pojman, Louis P. (1998) *Classics of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rose, Jacqueline (1986) 'Sexuality in the Field of Vision'. In: *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*. London: Verso, 225–234.
- Singley, Carol J. (ed.) (2003a) *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Singley, Carol J. (2003b) 'Race, culture, nation: Edith Wharton and Ernest Renan'. *Twentieth Century Literature* 49 (1), 32–45.
- Stendhal (2002 [1830]) *The Red and the Black*. Gard, Roger (trans). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Viglietta, Corinne. 'The Crisis of a Countess: Wharton's "New Frenchwoman" and a new American Woman in *The Age of Innocence*' <http://www.nd.edu/~ujournal/past/2005-6/online/countess.doc>
- Waid, Candace (2003) 'Introduction'. In: Waid, Candace (ed.) *The Age of Innocence*. New York: Norton.
- Weimann, Robert (1990) 'Realism, Ideology, and the Novel in America (1886–1896): Changing Perspectives in the World of Mark Twain, W. D. Howells, and Henry James'. *Boundary 2* 17(1), 189–210.
- Wegener, Frederick (1999) 'Form, Selection, and Ideology in Edith Wharton's Antimodernist Aesthetic'. In: Colquitt, Clare, Susan Goodman, and Candace Waid (eds.) *A Forward Glance: New Essays on Edith Wharton*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 116–38.
- Wegener, Frederick (2000) "'Rabid Imperialist': Edith Wharton and the Obligations of Empire in Modern American Fiction". *American Literature* 72(4), 783–812.
- Wharton, Edith (1974 [1920]) *The Age of Innocence*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Wharton, Edith (1996 [1927]). 'The Great American Novel'. In: Wegener, Frederick (ed.) *The Uncollected Critical Writings*. Princeton: Princeton, University Press, 151–58.
- Wharton, Edith (1997 [1919]) *French Ways and Their Meaning*. Woodstock, Vermont: The Countryman Press.
- Wershoven, Carol (1982) *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton*. East Brunswick: Associated University Press.
- Zizek, Slavoj (1989) 'Looking Awry'. *October* 50: 35–50.

THEODORA TSIMPOUKI is Professor at the Faculty of English Studies, University of Athens. She studied at the University of Athens, the Sorbonne and at New York University from where she received her Ph.D. She teaches and publishes in the areas of American literature and culture, ethnic studies and women's writing. Her books are on modernist American writers (Faulkner and Fitzgerald) and contemporary ethnic American writers (Chicano, Native American and Afro-American literature). Her articles and reviews on contemporary English and American writing, identity politics and feminist theory have appeared in periodicals and conference proceedings. Her most recent publication is a literary history of American Literature (co-authored with Paul Levine) in 2002. She was president of the Hellenic Association for American Studies from 1999 to 2006. She is co-editor of *Culture Agonistes: Debating Culture, Re-reading Texts* (Peter Lang, 2002) and *Greek Literature in an International Perspective* (Alexandria, 2002).

Address: Theodora Tsimpouki, Faculty of English Studies, School of Philosophy, University Campus, Zografou 157 84 GR, Greece. [email: tsimpouki@enl.uoa.gr]

