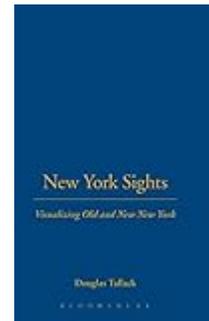


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Douglas Tallack. *New York Sights: Visualizing Old and New New York.* Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2005. xii + 212 pp. \$89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84520-169-2; \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84520-170-8.



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Published on H-Urban (October, 2006)

Seeing New York

One of the greatest challenges faced by a newcomer to New York City, certainly since the closing decades of the nineteenth century, is how to see the city. Should one see it from atop a tall building for an overall but perhaps abstract view? Or focus on the city from street level, appreciating the variations among neighborhoods but struggling to understand them as comprising a coherent whole? From the 1890s onward, as New York expanded in population as a result of mass immigration, and became both more extensive and more dense as a result of its physical growth, newspaper and periodical articles, as well as tourist ephemera, all struggled with the connections between seeing, knowing, and interpreting the city. Theorists of urban culture and of modernity-art historians as well as cultural historians of New York—have taken on these questions throughout the last century.[1] Douglas Tallack's contribution finds a niche in this crowded arena by combining the questions of the urban historian with the visual reading of the art historian, producing an analysis of the visual culture of New York City from the close of the nineteenth century to the period immediately before World War I. Like many scholars of "New York," what Tallack really focuses his

attention on, he freely admits, is the borough of Manhattan. The outer boroughs will have to wait for their own visual culture suitor to pay them their due. But given that Manhattan has so often been the actual object of the New York-oriented writer, painter or photographer's gaze, Tallack's focus is appropriate. Tallack aims to bring together canonical and non-canonical representations of New York with the socio-cultural context of their production. *New York Sights* covers familiar historical ground in a manner that, given the author's focus on visibility and his theoretical acuity, may be unfamiliar to some historians. However, for scholars interested in early twentieth-century urban culture, or in the visual culture of cities, this book represents a vital contribution.

Tallack's goal is broad: to discuss the visual representation of Manhattan as the city's identity shifted from what he (and contemporary observers) termed the "old" to the "new New York." Within that frame, Tallack analyzes particular images and particular ways of seeing in relation to the cultural, economic, and infrastructural changes that combined to produce New York as the capital of modernity. Tallack's periodization of this shift,

from the 1880s to the 1910s, follows that of contemporary writers such as Sadakichi Hartmann, Marianna Griswold Van Rensselaer, and John C. Van Dyke, whose 1909 book *The New New York* provided the strongest contemporary description for the shift and its meanings.[2] But Tallack also at times extends his discussion to include later photographic, cinematic, and painted images of the city that continue a representational thread he wishes to pursue. While this may muddy the historical periodization, it allows Tallack to give greater weight to his comments. The chapters are organized around different perspectives on the city which, Tallack argues, produce specific types of views and thus meanings—the view from street level, from and of mass transit, views from a distance, and a final chapter on “visual excess” (perhaps the book’s strongest) which considers the “extraordinary, iconic nature of New York, a city that cannot easily be separated from its visual representations” (p.166), examining the period from mid-century to September 11, 2001.

The great strength of Tallack’s book lies in his sophisticated interpretations of individual images. Tallack is well versed in the language of art history but deploys such language tempered by a wide-ranging theoretical and historical knowledge, rendering his analysis more accessible to an American Studies and urban history readership. The resulting discussions of visual texts—as varied as bird’s-eye views in Moses King’s turn-of-the-century tourist guides to photographs by Alfred Stieglitz, and paintings by artists such as John Sloan, Charles Sheeler, John Marin, and Piet Mondrian—provides the reader with a strong sense of how the representation of New York worked in dialogue with larger contemporary tensions over the meaning for Americans of their nation’s burgeoning consumer capitalism, its divisions of class and power, and the struggle to maintain notions of American republican exceptionalism in the face of an emerging American empire and the apparent reproduction of the social divisions from the “old world” of Europe.

In its interdisciplinarity and its analysis of visual texts in historical context, Tallack’s work stands as an example of scholarship in the American Studies tradition of Alan Trachtenberg and scholarship in art history by scholars such as T.J. Clark.[3] Tallack’s references are mostly to the secondary literatures of art history and visual culture studies, so some urban historians may at first glance assume the work would not fit well into their teaching or their own scholarship. Although a familiarity with the theoretical discussions of vision and visuality by art historians such as Martin Jay and Jonathan Crary,

and with the work of twentieth-century European theories of modernity by Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel, and the Frankfurt School will stand the reader in good stead, a deep background knowledge of those literatures is not necessary to evaluate Tallack’s analysis. For example, if one takes chapter sections that focus on an image subject—such as Stieglitz’s and others’ photographs of the Flatiron Building—and reads through Tallack’s analysis of the images and his contextualization of them, even the theory-shy historian or the beginner in visual culture studies can appreciate Tallack’s reading.

One minor challenge Tallack’s book poses is of a more structural nature. The author’s overall thesis and the arguments of the different chapters are not easy to find. Perhaps the problem extends from an academic writing style different from that predominating in the American humanities academy; Tallack was educated at Sussex and is now at the University of Nottingham. Urban historians eager to engage with Tallack’s analysis of New York may find themselves searching back and forth in Tallack’s introductory chapter for the classic thesis statement U.S.-educated scholars are trained to write. That quibble aside, I would highly recommend this book to urban historians wishing to update their thinking and teaching about American cities to include an analysis of urban visual culture. Chapters of the book could certainly be assigned to undergraduate urban history and American Studies classes. *New York Sights* may be especially useful to graduate students pursuing urban topics in history, American Studies, or literature departments. Tallack’s book models the type of close analysis necessary for the evaluation of visual documents as primary sources and for work in material culture studies. His references to both European and North American secondary literatures, theoretical and historical, represent the breadth of reading and depth of critical thinking vital to the development of a strong research topic at any stage one’s academic career.

Notes

[1]. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zohn (London: Collins, 1973); John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972); Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan, 1983); Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1992); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. S. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge: Polity, 1985);

Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[2]. John C. Van Dyke, *The New New York: A Commentary on the Place and the People* (New York: Macmillan, 1909).

[3]. T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985); Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), and *Reading American Photographs: Images As History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, reprint 1990).

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Citation: Angela Blake. Review of Tallack, Douglas, *New York Sights: Visualizing Old and New New York*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. October, 2006.

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