BEGINNING IN THE late eighteenth century, a striking change came over systems of social organization and classification in Europe. Where nations had once publicly executed and tortured criminals, they now imprisoned them or executed corporal punishment out of sight. In the monarchical system, a crime was understood as an attack on the monarch that had to be rectified by a punishment meted out to the body of the condemned. The sufferings of torture were understood both as an expiation of the crime and as a means of restoring the king’s imagined body, that is to say the state of majesty, to its proper state. The worst tortures, such as the extended dismembering of Damiens in 1757 were therefore reserved for those who literally attacked the King in person. In 1894 when Captain Alfred Dreyfus was falsely convicted of spying for Germany, he was sentenced to penal servitude and was publicly cashiered. That is to say, where Damiens had undergone the most extreme sufferings of the flesh, culminating in his being pulled apart by horses, Dreyfus suffered the public humiliation of the soul in which his marks of military rank were cut off, his sword broken and his fellow soldiers turned their backs on him in front of a crowd of 20,000 people. The point here is not that Dreyfus’s punishment was lesser than that of Damiens. Indeed, the Dreyfus Affair was one of the key developments in the rise of modern anti-semitism whose consequences became clear in Nazi Germany. Rather it indicates that whereas the monarch had punished the physical body, the state punished and corrected the “soul,” a phenomenon that was called into being by the processes of discipline using the language of religion.

Accompanying and interacting with the change in regimes of punishment to codes of discipline was the emergence of the concept of the “norm.” As theorized by Jacques Quetelet in 1844, the norm provided a means to rank and organize apparently random phenomena, such as height and weight. By means of statistical analysis, it could be demonstrated that in a given category, such characteristics tended to
group in what has become known as a "bell curve." That is to say, if the data are plotted on a graph, the resulting curve looks like the outline of a bell, rising from the leading edge to a flattened peak and dropping down again. Those areas of the curve at and close to the peak represented the greatest number of cases and would be defined as the "norm." It is important to recognize that the process of defining a norm relied on determining what lies outside it. So "transgressive" behavior or categories of being are not only predicted by the normative but required by it in order to delineate the norm. The statistical process of analyzing the norm was transferred to the human sciences as the binary category of the normal and the pathological. A given state thus has two variants, one normal, the other pathological or diseased. Thus whereas it had been once possible to describe someone as being, for example, one-third deaf, by the middle of the nineteenth century a person was either hearing, and thus normal, or deaf and thus pathological. The usages of the normal have often been very beneficial in medical care and social analysis. However, they have also lent themselves to defining certain categories of people as altogether pathological, a definition that has in extreme cases lent to their physical extermination.

Following the research of French philosopher Michel Foucault, one can call this transformation the emergence of "bio-power," a power over life itself. Bio-power had two predominant forms in modern society. First, it sought to train and discipline
the individual body. For example, a person became a soldier through the practice of drills, a ritual that has been enshrined in many movies as the making of formerly weak people into strong soldiers. In Foucault’s analysis, the goal was the production of “docile bodies.” A docile body could work on the new mechanized production lines in factories without causing injury to itself or others, adapt to the social environment of the new cities and create new behaviors suitable for life in crowds and other public spaces. The second goal of bio-power was the maximum extension of life by means of health provisions, retirement and other welfare systems. A trained workforce was worth preserving at the instrumental level and such rewards provided an incentive for people to participate in the new structures of work. At the abstract level, power did not just repress people. In Foucault’s view, power flows in networks, like electricity, and can be used in different ways, even by the apparently powerless. A significant part of his research was devoted to recovering the traces of those designated insane or otherwise deviant by the system of disciplinarity and using their histories as key evidence for how society as a whole was organized.

Foucault’s key illustration of this radical shift was the Panopticon devised in 1791 by Jeremy Bentham, an English philosopher. The Panopticon – literally, the place where everything is seen — was Bentham’s device for a model prison. He called the Panopticon “an inspection house” for the reformation of morals, whether of prisoners, workers or prostitutes, by means of constant surveillance that the inmates could not perceive, a system summed up by Foucault in the aphorism “visibility is a trap” (1977: 200). The Panopticon proper would have consisted of an outer ring of cells, supervised from a central control tower, constructed so that each prisoner could see neither his fellows nor the supervisors in the tower but was fully visible to anyone watching from the tower. The guards could thus see the prisoners without being seen themselves. Rather than control prisoners with expensive fortifications and numerous guards as was traditionally the case, they could now be managed from one central point. The vanishing point that organized perspective had now become a point of social control. Bentham imagined it as being constructed from the then new architectural materials of iron and glass, which he called “a glass bee-hive.” A proper Panopticon would thus have looked more like the Crystal Palace built for the International Exhibition in 1851, or the Paris Arcades, than the forbidding structures actually built in the period. It was also technically difficult in the period to achieve the permanent visibility so central to the project. Bentham at first proposed that the prisoners would in effect be back-lit by large glass windows, while lamps backed by reflectors would generate visibility at night. When the then governor of prisons heard of the scheme, he simply pointed out, “They will all get out.” Later Bentham proposed using gaslight, an idea far ahead of its time, as was his scheme for listening tubes in each cell (Semple, 1993: 116–21). So although the principle of surveillance was central to nineteenth-century prisons, schools, military barracks and factories alike, it is true to say that no real Panopticon was ever built. The closest approximation was a prison for recalcitrant deported convicts erected in Port Arthur, Tasmania.
The Panopticon sought to control prisoners and keep discipline through a system of visibility:

And, in order to be exercised this power had to be given the instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible as long as it could itself remain invisible. It had to be a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception.

(Foucault, 1977: 214)
The disciplinary society differed from early modern visibility in that it ceased to matter exactly who was watching so long as individuals continued to be visible. Whereas the Hall of Mirrors at Louis XIV’s Palace of Versailles displayed the body politic itself — that is to say, the symbolic power of the King as manifested in his individual person — in the Panopticon it did not matter who was looking. Bentham specified that while the system was devised so that the prison governor could supervise the inmates, anyone could be substituted, even servants or children, because the prisoners could not see who was looking. They knew only that they were being watched. Perspective ordered the visual field and created a place from which to see. The Panopticon created a social system around that possibility of seeing others. The key to this visualized system was that those who felt themselves to be observed could be controlled.

The disciplinary system was in effect the fusion of the colonial system of surveillance of the enslaved and colonized with the new classifications created by the norm and its predication of a binary opposition between the normal and the pathological. Foucault suggested that the disciplinary system could first be observed in the Jesuit colonies in Paraguay “in which existence was regulated at every turn” (Foucault, 1967/2002: 235). This surveillance was carried out directly, whether by the Jesuit priests in their colonies or the aptly named overseer on the plantation. It was reinforced and made viable by the ever-present threat of extreme physical violence used in slavery and colonization alike. The Panopticon was intended to reduce the need for such punishment of the body. It did so by prompting the prisoner (the soldier, the factory worker, or the child) to discipline themselves, that is to say, to subject themselves to a series of norms. Bentham explicitly derived his project from a Russian system adopted or created by his brother for a factory in St. Petersburg. It was intended to be the solution for the mass overcrowding of British prisons that was in fact solved by the deportation of prisoners to Australia, where the First Fleet anchored in 1788. In short, the Panopticon was the creature of the globalization of its day.

Foucault derived from the Panopticon the principle of power itself: “Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes. . . . The Panopticon is a marvelous machine which, whatever one may wish to put it to, produces homogenous effects of power” (Foucault, 1977: 201). If the distribution of lights, gazes, and surfaces within the Panopticon were changed, then it would have disrupted the principle of power. The power of visuality was in fact far from homogenous. Bentham knew what lurked within his panoptic papers: “it is like opening a drawer where devils are locked up — it is breaking into a haunted house” (Semple, 1993: 16). He even came to realize that solitary confinement, a key part of his original plan, was in fact its undoing as a system of visibility: “in a state of solitude, infantine superstitions, ghosts and spectres, recur to the imagination” (Semple, 1993: 132). In short, the marvelous machine was out of order. The prisoner could neither be perfectly visible nor be constantly aware of disciplinary surveillance. Consequently, they were not disciplined, but simply punished: they became ghosts.
Discipline and color

The discipline established by the panoptical system with its structure of norms extended as far as color, the presumed opposite of perspective and other geometric systems of ordering space. Color presents an interesting complementary case to that of perspective, rather than a radical contrast. Throughout the early modern period, color was an alternative method of pictorial construction to the geometric perspective system. Obviously, color perception is a crucial part of human eyesight. Unlike perspective, it has been possible to describe color in exact scientific terms as a property of light, but the perception of color varies from person to person, even before the vexed questions of taste and color symbolism can be addressed. As a consequence, artists, scientists and visual technicians have sought various ways to render the depiction of color without the possibility of variation or dispute. In this way, the representational aspect of the visual image could be balanced with the resemblance provided by accurate depiction of color. However, color's seemingly infinite variations of hue, tint and shade provide stubborn resistance to such classification. Artists and scientists have devised an apparently endless array of color charts, triangles and wheels that were the analog to the perspectivists' geometric diagrams. No one was ready to go into the picture space unaided.

No effective system could be devised for standardizing the construction of picture space by color. Artistic uses of color very soon differed from the scientific understanding of the subject. Painters from the seventeenth century onwards have held that all colors can be created using three primary colors, namely blue, red and yellow. However, in his famous Opticks (1704), Isaac Newton showed that light was composed of seven prismatic colors: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. By the mid-nineteenth century the German scientist and philosopher Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–94) was able to show that there was a fundamental difference between additive and subtractive means of making color. Colored light relies on adding light together, based on the primary colors red, green and blue. Paint and other forms of pigment absorb certain forms of light from the spectrum in order to generate the perception of a specific color, and thus used blue, red and yellow as primaries (Kemp, 1990: 262). Helmholtz's explanation has since been shown to be flawed but at the time it helped explain why artists and scientists had differed over the very composition of color for 150 years.

The normalization of vision around the perception of color can be illustrated with the case of color blindness. It was not until the first half of the nineteenth century that ophthalmologists first discovered the existence of color blindness and then devised tests to diagnose the condition. The British scientist John Dalton had recognized his own inability to perceive red in the 1790s, naming the condition "Daltonism." After Charles Darwin's The Origin of Species (1859) had given wide currency to the notion of evolution, intellectuals began to play with the idea that color vision had evolved in humanity within historical time, rather than in the mists of prehistory. This is an excellent example of the misuse of evolution to explain differences within one species, namely the human species, rather than relative
patterns of development between species. In order to explain this discrepancy, scientists postulated that the human species was in fact composed of different races who were biologically different from each other. It must be emphasized that despite a century of scientific endeavor to identify these differences, no definable biological difference between humans has been found. Indeed, genetic science has clearly shown that all humans share the same gene pool. Nonetheless, social Darwinism—as this application of evolution to humans was called—has flourished for over a century as a means to seek rational explanations for the irrationality of racial prejudice. So far reaching were these efforts in the nineteenth century that intellectuals claimed to have identified historical differences in color perception amongst the different "races."

Anthropologists combined old antisemitic and racist prejudices with the new "science" of race to provide a racial origin for color-blindness. In 1877, the German philologist Hans Magnus conducted a study of color in the work of the ancient Greek poet Homer. He found a very restricted number of Homeric terms for color, most of which appeared to distinguish light from dark more than they did particular tints. He concluded that Greeks of the period had in fact seen in black and white and that the color sense was a recent and developing aspect of human evolution that would soon permit humans to perceive the ultra-violet elements of the spectrum. Magnus developed this argument to explain color-blindness in hereditary terms:

Beginning from the opinion that, in the most distant periods of human evolution, the functional capacity of the retina was restricted to detecting manifestations of light, . . . we are inclined to believe that cases of complete congenital color-blindness must be considered a type of atavism.

(Magnus, 1878: 108)

Recognizing the importance of color to manufacturing, Magnus developed a practical color chart in order to educate the industrial working classes in the names and range of color.

These ideas were given dramatic support by the British prime minister and noted classical scholar, William Gladstone. Gladstone conducted his own study of ten books of the Odyssey and found only "thirty-one cases in nearly five thousand lines, where Homer can be said to introduce the element or the idea of color; or about once in a hundred and sixty lines" (Gladstone, 1877: 383). For the Victorians, Homer's prestige was so great that this oversight could not be attributed to mere indifference to color or simple failure of description, it had to indicate a profound truth. Gladstone therefore concluded that the Greeks' perception of color was like a photograph, that is to say black and white. His empirical evidence came from the colonies: "Perhaps one of the most significant relics of the older state of things is to be found in the preference, known to the manufacturing world, of the uncivilized races for strong, and what is called in the spontaneous poetry of trading phrases,
lour colour” (Gladstone, 1877: 367). That is to say, if color vision evolved gradually, it was only natural that the least evolved preferred strong, intense colors that were easy to distinguish.

As these remarks from one of the most distinguished Liberal prime ministers of the century show, almost all Europeans casually assumed their superiority to other “races,” such as Africans, Asians or Jews, who demonstrated that inferiority by their vulgar taste for loud colors. This prejudice often continues to be expressed against Mexican immigrants to the United States, Indians in Great Britain and Jewish communities everywhere. Soon racial “science” advanced the belief that, because of their presumed intermarriage since Biblical times, Jews were especially prone to color-blindness as an atavistic throwback to early human history. Africans and other colonized peoples were already perceived as being “stuck” at this early stage of development, as evidenced by Western military and technological superiority. The peculiar combination of literary and political authority, mingled with the empirical “truths” of colonialism and anthropology that gave rise to the notion of the evolution of the color sense was simply too embedded in nineteenth-century common-sense to be challenged. The result was that the disciplinary system of vision that had been instituted in the early nineteenth century became racialized around the issue of color. By adding the “scientific” dimension of race to the fugitive trace of color, it became possible to restore a dimension of presumed objectivity to the subjective perception of color that color-blindness had been revealed to be far from universal.

Around the time that Gladstone published his article on Homer, a fatal railway accident in Sweden was attributed to the color-blindness of the train driver. The Swedish physiologist Fithio Holmgren (1831–97) established that 13 of the 266 workers on his local railway line were color-blind and set about devising a standardized test. For if safety depended upon the ability to distinguish between a red and green railway signal, whether by light or flag, it was important that an employee could register that difference. In this example, we see the double-edged nature of modern discipline. It is clearly in the interests of all passengers and railway employees that signal staff be able to distinguish between the lights and flags. It became imperative to devise a test. Using the actual flags was held to be too simple because the subject had too good a chance of passing by luck. Holmgren devised a wool test in which the subject was presented with a random collection of strands of wool and asked to select those that matched another single strand, dyed pale green. According to an account published in Nature, “when confusing colours have been selected, or when an unnatural slowness and hesitation have been shown in selecting, the examinee must be regarded as either completely or incompletely colour-blind” (Brudenell Carter, 1890: 60). For the employee, a failed test meant dismissal. It was claimed that 4 percent of the “civilized” suffered from color-blindness, a point emphasized by claims that it was especially prevalent among Jews and less noticeable in the schoolboys of Eton, Britain’s foremost private school. Both Holmgren’s test and Magnus’s color chart were introduced into the United States by Dr. Benjamin Joy Jeffries (1833–1915), who campaigned for their widespread
adoption. In less than a century, vision had become subdivided into a series of differentiated categories of color perception, centering around a norm, which were established by testing, trained by education, subjected to racialization and calculated by statistics.

Light over color

Nineteenth-century avant-garde art, such as that of the Impressionists, is usually thought of as being far removed from such prejudices. Yet their assertion of the domination of color and then light in art often made explicit or implicit use of such racialized imagery. Later nineteenth-century artists sought to control color by again subjecting it to racial theory and ultimately by concentrating solely on light. Through this focus on light, the Impressionists and later modern artists sought to control reality itself. The pro-Impressionist critic Edmond Duranty asserted that light in itself “reflects both the ensemble of all the [color] rays and the color of the vault that covers the earth. Now, for the first time, painters have understood and reproduced, or tried to reproduce, these phenomena” (Broude, 1991: 126). What was at stake was the normalizing control of vision and visual representation through a seemingly exact system of knowledge that might overcome the ambiguities of representation.

![Figure 4.4 Claude Monet, Impression: Sunrise, Le Havre (1872). Courtesy of Musée Marmottan, Paris/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library](image-url)
A few years later another Impressionist supporter, the poet and art critic Jules Laforgue, gave these ideas an explicitly racialized context, mixing them with his understanding of Darwin in his famous 1883 essay on Impressionism:

The impressionist eye is, in short, the most advanced eye in human evolution, the one which until now has grasped and rendered the most complicated combinations of nuances known... Everything is obtained by a thousand little dancing strokes in every direction like straws of color - each struggling for survival in the overall impression. No longer an isolated melody, the whole thing is a symphony, which is living and changing, like the "fores" of Wagner, all struggling for existence in the great voice of the forest-like the Unconscious, the law of the world, which is the great melodic voice resulting from the symphony of consciousnesses of races and individuals. Such is the principle of the plein air Impressionist school. And the eye of the master will be the one capable of distinguishing and recording the most sensitive gradations and decompositions, and that on a simple flat canvas.

(Nochlin, 1966: 17)

Laforgue's endorsement of the Modernist aesthetic of flatness has ensured his place in the critical canon, but his belief that Impressionism was the product of a Darwinian struggle for cultural existence dominates the essay. His references to the Teutonic forest clearly identified the Impressionists as Northern, or Aryan. For he was less concerned with the means of representation than the internal effect caused by the painting, which was above all perceptible to the "eye of the master," that is to say, the master race.

Two years later, the avant-garde theorist Félix Bracquemond separated color from light altogether, noting that a drawing specialist used color without understanding the effects of reflections and complementary color, with the result that such work looked like an Oriental carpet. As we have seen, this remark was not a compliment but an assertion that the artist had a primitive understanding of color and thus of visual representation itself. The colorist did not in fact rely on the constantly changing range of color but on light. "Art isolates color and makes an image from it by using the intensities of light [clairs], which are relatively stable and always verifiable in their proportions" (Bracquemond, 1885: 47). Light disciplines color. By extension and implication, the Northern "race" disciplines the Southern. In both cases, the Western perception is that the evasive element was controlled by a more powerful force.

This insistence on the primacy of light over color entailed some surprising conclusions. It is unexpected to hear Vincent Van Gogh argue that the rules of color contradict traditional notions of artistic genius:

The laws of the colors are unutterably beautiful, just because they are not accidental. In the same way that people nowadays no longer believe
in a God who capriciously and despotically flies from one thing to another, but begin to feel more respect and admiration for, and faith in nature — in the same way and for the same reasons, I think that in art, the old fashioned idea of innate genius, inspiration etc., I do not say must be put aside, but thoroughly reconsidered, verified — and greatly modified.

(Gage, 1993: 205)

Ironically, Van Gogh has now become the archetype of the modern artistic genius, evidenced above all by his vivid use of color. By the late nineteenth century, color seemed to have been as thoroughly subdued as the colonies in Africa and Asia that it was held to represent. When Henri Matisse developed his stunning palette of colors in works like Blue Nude — Souvenir of Biskra (1907) that directly evoked Western travel to Africa, he was direct enough to say that, far from being a radical gesture, he saw his art as being like "an armchair for the tired businessman."

White

In order to understand how this disciplining of color operated in specific cases, let us consider the apparently simple case of the color white. Understanding the meanings of this one color in the nineteenth century renders the familiar distinction between complex texts and simple visual materials questionable at best. White takes us to the purported origin of Western art, and its highest known form, Greek and Roman sculpture. In the nineteenth century, the beauty of these sculptures was held to be epitomized by their pure white marble. The ancient Greeks themselves colored their statues with bright primary-color paint, a fact known to classical scholars since the 1770s. Recent recreations have shown that classical statues were painted with blood flowing from wounds, complex costume patterns, detailed hairstyles and so

Figure 4.5 The Elgin Marbles: east pediment of the Parthenon. © The British Museum
on in ways that eyes trained by undorned stone forms find gaudy or even tasteless. In the nineteenth century, by contrast, Greek statues were held to be white because whiteness conveyed the exquisite taste of the Greeks as well as their "Aryan" racial origins, and served as evidence of their monochrome vision (described above). So strong was this belief that the British Museum had the Elgin Marbles, sculptures from the Parthenon in Athens, vigorously scrubbed in the 1930s because they appeared insufficiently white (see Figure 4.5). So much for the argument that the British are the best placed to preserve the sculptures from future damage!

Whiteness came to convey an intense physical beauty in itself. In Oscar Wilde's novel, The Portrait of Dorian Gray (1892), the aesthete and aristocrat Lord Henry Wotton compares Gray to a Classical sculpture:

"He was a marvellous type, too, this lad . . . ; or could be fashioned into a marvellous type at any rate. Grace was his, and the white purity of boyhood and beauty, such as old Greek marbles kept for us. There was nothing that one could not do with him."

(Jenyns, 1980: 141)

Two seemingly contradictory forces run through this passage. On the one hand, whiteness expresses the ideal racial type, as made explicit by the Victorian painter Frederick Lord Leighton: "In the Art of the Periclean Age we find a new ideal of balanced form, wholly Aryan and of which the only parallel I know is sometimes found in the women of another Aryan race," that is to say, the Germans (Jenyns, 1980: 145).

On the other hand, there was unsurprisingly more than a hint of homoeroticism in Wilde's own writing. He was making a by-then familiar connection between Greek sculpture, whiteness and the homoerotic. His Victorian contemporary Walter Pater, who similarly praised the "white light" of Greek sculpture, traced the homoeroticism it engendered back to the writing of J.J. Winckelmann. Winckelmann's eighteenth-century investigations into ancient sculpture — especially his History of Ancient Art (1764) — are usually considered the first works of modern art history. Furthermore, at the time he was writing "for many worldly Europeans 'Rome,' as well as 'Greek art,' already signified sexual freedom and available boys" (Davis, 1998: 146), in the same way that Christopher Street or San Francisco's Castro district have gay resonances today. Winckelmann did not make this connection explicit but he stressed the importance for the art historian of understanding male beauty: "I have noticed that those who fix their attention only on the beauties of women, and who are only feebly affected by those of our own sex do not in any way possess the sentiment of beauty to the degree necessary to constitute a real connoisseur" (Winckelmann, 1786: 244). Pater elucidated such careful statements as meaning

that his affinity with Hellenism was not merely intellectual, that the subtler threads of temperament were inwoven in it, is proved by his
romantic, fervent friendships with young men. . . . These friendships, 
bringing him in contact with the pride of human form, and staining his 
thoughts with its bloom, perfected his reconciliation with the spirit of 
Greek sculpture.

(Jenkyns, 1980: 150)

By the late nineteenth century it was a commonplace that the whiteness of Greek 
sculpture was a mark of its aesthetic quality. In turn for both Pater and Wilde, the 
Oxford aesthetes, those able to appreciate these qualities of whiteness found both 
a justification for and a reflection of same-sex desire.

How could the same color give rise to notions of racial supremacy and of what 
was then becoming known as homosexuality, “the love that dare not speak its name,” 
to quote Lord Alfred Douglas’s famous poem of the period? As Eve Kosofsky 
Sedgwick has argued, the rediscovery of ancient Greece created

for the nineteenth century a prestigious, historically underfurnished 
imaginative space in which relations to and among human bodies might 
be newly a subject of utopian speculation. Synecdochically represented 
as it tended to be by statues of nude young men, the Victorian cult of 
Greece gently, unpointedly, and unexclusively positioned male flesh and 
muscle as the indicative instances of “the” body.

(Sedgwick, 1990: 136)

This new imaginative space allowed unusual connections to be made through the 
male body. It had been a long-standing justification of the European colonization of 
America that it would prevent the sodomy of the indigenous peoples. As early as 
1519, a few years after the first contact, the Spanish conquistador Cortés reported 
home: “They are all sodomites” (Goldberg, 1992: 193). This blanket description 
served to mark the absolute difference between the Europeans and the indigenous 
peoples. Yet at the same time, Europeans forcibly sodomized those they defeated 
as a mark of absolute domination. Anthropologist Richard Trexler has shown that 
the Spanish army transferred its own system of discipline via forced sodomy to the 
Amerindians (Trexler, 1995). Domination and difference came to be signified as 
sodomy, or at least as sexual relations between men.

Skeptics may wonder if these paradoxical and multiple interpretations of white 
were really seen by nineteenth-century audiences. It is of course impossible to know 
whether every spectator had these sentiments but they were certainly noticeable 
at the time. In his 1851 novel Moby Dick, the American novelist Herman Melville 
recounted an epic saga in which Captain Ahab leads his crew to disaster in his 
obsessive pursuit of the white whale known as Moby Dick. Melville saw white as 
the color of holiness and beauty but speculated at length as to why it also induced 
what he termed “a certain nameless terror. . . . [I]n many natural objects, whiteness 
refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own, as in
marbles, japonicas and pearls.” The white beauty of marble leads directly to a dis-
sussion of the imperial quality of the color, which “applies to the human race itself,
giving the white man ideal mastership over every dusky tribe.” As he digresses
on other aspects of the fear induced by white, Melville names the Peruvian capital
Lima as

the strangest, saddest city thou canst see. For Lima has taken the white
veil; and there is a higher horror in this whiteness of her woe. Old as
Pizarro, this whiteness keeps her ruins for ever new; admits not the
cheerful greenness of complete decay; spreads over her broken ram-
parts the rigid pallor of an apoplexy that fixes its own distortions.

The journey within whiteness from sculpture to race theory and the Spanish
conquest of Latin America outlined above was also taken by Melville. Melville saw
whiteness as terror and beauty at once, oscillating from one meaning to the next,
but all symbolized by this color, “a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we
shrink” (Melville, [1851] 1988: 188–95). In similar fashion, Sigmund Freud’s
concept of the “uncanny,” or unheimlich, the sense of being haunted or otherwise
displaced from feeling at home, came to mean its apparent opposite, the sense of
being at home, heimlich. It was in part that internal instability within the categories
that discipline wanted to keep distinct that led to its radical acceleration in the late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

1895: global panopticism

The normative aspect of the disciplinary society came fully into effect in a period
of a few years in the late nineteenth century. Modernity was reconfigured from the
zone implied by the norm into a social application of the sharp distinction between
the normal and the pathological. A series of radical new distinctions in disability
education, race and sexuality remade modern Europe in colonialism’s image. One
of the great achievements of the French Revolution was the establishment of an
Institute for the Deaf in 1791 that taught students in sign language. One former
student turned instructor named Laurent Clerc came to the United States, where
he helped establish Gallaudet College (now Gallaudet University), where instruction
was also in sign. However, the hearing educators of the deaf came to see sign
language as a visible symptom of the pathology of deafness that prevented the deaf
from integrating into hearing society. Further, it was argued, sign could be an
impediment to factory workers by using their hands for communication rather than
labor. At an international conference held in Milan in 1800, sign language was
banned from deaf education, a ruling that persisted until the 1970s. Deaf children
were forced to sit on their hands in class and would be struck on the hands if they
attempted to sign. This movement, known as “oralism,” successfully downgraded
the visual language of sign by means of comparison with the “primitive savage” and
monkeys. If missionaries, settlers and explorers were using gestures to communicate in the colonies, it could not be a “normal” form of civilized language. Such gestures are of course simple pantomime, whereas sign language proper has its own abstract vocabulary and spatial grammar. The normal body would communicate only by sound. Such newly archival and indexical binary difference could be found across imperial modernity. In 1895, Oscar Wilde was convicted in London of “gross indecency,” meaning homosexuality, and sentenced to two years’ hard labor, leading to his death in 1898. As Foucault has shown, the “homosexual” was a newly classified “species” in the period, distinguished in all aspects from the “heterosexual” that it called into being (1978: 43). Whereas an animal species might be characterized anatomically, the “homosexual” represented what Foucault called “an interior androgyny, a hermaphrodisim of the soul,” changing the homosexual act, punished on the body, into a homosexual “soul,” classified and ordered by discipline. By the same token, the Dreyfus Affair mobilized different sectors of French society around the question of the nature of the “Jew”: for those supporting the Army, Jews were inherently cosmopolitan, and therefore potential traitors, whereas the Dreyfusards, as his supporters came to be known, argued from the basis of evidence that he was innocent. Both positions were modern. The Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro was as ardently convinced of Dreyfus’s innocence, as his fellow artist Edgar Degas was of his guilt.

In June 1892, Homer Plessey defied the recently passed segregation laws of Louisiana and took a seat in a “white” car on an East Louisiana Railroad train. Plessey was a so-called Creole of Color, meaning that he was descended from Spanish or French settlers as well as African diaspora forced migrants, whose family had been in the region since before the Louisiana Purchase. Although himself light-skinned (if one must use such descriptors), Plessey was now classified as “black” by virtue of Louisiana’s “one drop” law, meaning that a person with any African descent was now “black.” Here the “norm” had rigidified into a binary exclusion. Plessey’s conviction was upheld by the United States Supreme Court in 1896, giving segregation a legal basis that persisted until overturned by the combined impact of Brown v. The Board of Education in 1954 and the Civil Rights Act of 1965. In his classic Souls of Black Folk, published in 1903, the African-American activist and historian W.E.B. Du Bois described the African American as having what he called a “double-consciousness”: “one ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro” (1903: 2000: 2). This twoness was a specific product of the moment in which Du Bois was writing, when African-American difference was being enshrined as absolute, a visible form of difference that could be archived and indexed.

This realignment of legal, medical, religious and ethnic categorization was complemented by the new world order of imperialism. In 1898, the Spanish-American war ended 400 years of Spanish presence in the Americas and gave hegemony of the hemisphere to the United States, as well as the territories of Cuba, the Philippines and Puerto Rico. The war had a distinctly contemporary feel. The three-year guerrilla war in the Philippines sparked significant opposition in the US, led by such
figures as Mark Twain and William James. It is as a consequence of this conflict that the US Navy has an outpost at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, that has been of such significance as a prison and interrogation center since 2001. Indeed, one of the first concentration camps was established on Cuba during the Spanish-American war, with a similar establishment being set up by the British in South Africa. Both were foreshadowed by the convict lease-labor camps in the United States, in which private enterprise undertook labor-intensive tasks using predominantly African-American convict labor for very low cost. These camps were the dialectical other to the reforming Panopticon. Neither the concentration camp nor the convict labor camp had any concern to reform their detainees. The object was in the first case simply to sequester people felt to be dangerous and in the second to generate low-cost labor. As activist and philosopher Angela Y. Davis has emphasized, the passage of Black Codes in the South after the repression of Reconstruction criminalized certain behaviors ranging from theft to being “wanton in conduct or speech,” or “all other idle and disorderly persons” (1998: 76). While such catch-all categories had been included in nineteenth-century Vagrancy Acts, they were now directed at only one group of people. In combination with the new forms of labor such as share-cropping, the Black Codes and convict leasing placed the formerly enslaved under a new disciplinary system of “quasi-total control” (1998: 78). Homer Plessey became the visible symbol of that system, one that certainly aspired to seeing all activity but only for the benefit of the rulers, not the ruled. The United States’s realignment took place in a time that placed no less than 85 percent of the world’s surface under one form or another of imperial domination by 1914. It was also the period of the invention of cinema, with the screening of the Lumière brothers’ first films in December 1895. These “views,” as they called them, were shot on precisely 17 meters of film that was projected on their cinematograph device. The famous Arrival of a Train in La Ciotat was held to have caused people to flee the room in panic,

Figure 4.6
Lumière brothers, Arrivée d’un train (à la Ciotat) (Arrival of a Train in La Ciotat) (1895). 35mm print, black and white, silent, approx. 45 seconds. Courtesy of The Kobal Collection
a story now much disputed. Some attribute it to a clever publicity ploy, others suggest that the film recalled a well-known recent train crash, and still others say that the film had not yet been made. The fact that the story was believed for so long shows that modernity has come to be understood as cinematic and that it is a perceptual shock to the senses.

Perhaps our understanding of the Arrival of a Train changes again in light of Homer Plessey’s attempt to desegregate the Louisiana train system? Amongst their many “views,” the Lumières also filmed a now less-celebrated short called Nègres dansant dans la rue (Blacks dancing in the street) in London in 1896, featuring “blacked-up” minstrels, as one of their “comic” films. Moving images came to represent current events for the first time during the Spanish-American war by the New York based fledgling film company Vitagraph. It was formed by two classic Atlantic world characters, Albert E. Smith, an actor descended from a long line of sailors, and the marine painter Jim Blackton. The two abandoned a failing vaudeville company for a motion picture enterprise after seeing a demonstration of Edison’s kinetoscope in 1895. Although Vitagraph did well at first, it was again on the verge of failure when the Spanish-American war of 1898 provided them with an opportunity. After a success with a simple film of marching soldiers, Blackton and Smith claimed to join Roosevelt’s Rough Riders in Cuba and released a film that purported to show the US troops in action along with a faked film of the Battle of Santiago Bay of 1898 that destroyed the Spanish Caribbean fleet. The success of these films and Smith’s later footage of the Boer War launched a company that lasted until its purchase by Warner Brothers in 1925. Film historians have suggested that the outburst of shorts depicting the war introduced the concept of narrative into moving pictures, turning the “view” into a structured story that could become cinema (Musser, 1990: 225). However, as Amy Kaplan has rightly emphasized, “spectacles of foreign warfare become stories only in relation to the domestic sphere” (1999: 1070), where “domestic” refers both to the household and the sense of “domestic” politics in contrast to foreign policy. The classifications and visualizations of race were the medium that enabled that link to be made. In 1900 Vitagraph pioneered some animation shorts based on Blackton’s “Chalk Talk” variety act (Smith, 1952) (1985): 29). First the names “Cohen” and “Coom” were written on a blackboard. Then each name was turned into a stereotypical racist cartoon. While such early animated shorts were long dismissed as curiosities, they are now receiving renewed critical attention as forerunners to digital cinema both on the large screen and in formats like Quicktime. In a certain sense, Cohen and Coom is sadly familiar material, even though the specific piece may well be obscure now.

The normative binary oppositions of the imperial disciplinary perspective created by the world empires of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries set the boundaries for what could and could not be seen. That is to say, race, whether as the African or the “Jew,” set one axis of the imperial world-view, while the binary opposition of sex and gender set the other. Along this axis, male was opposed, and therefore attracted to, female, categories that were now taken to be norms. When
French feminist Simone de Beauvoir set out her ground-breaking theory of *The Second Sex* in 1949, she argued that "woman has been defined as the Other" (1953: ix). It was axiomatic for her that this Otherness was "precisely like the 'equal but separate' formula of the Jim Crow laws aimed at the North American Negroes" (1953: liii). De Beauvoir understood that maintaining separate and subordinate modalities of gender, and hence sexuality, required maintaining similar modalities of race and colonial hierarchy. The following chapters will therefore use these categories of race, gender and sexuality to trouble the notions of culture, sexual difference, the West and the digital that were central to the construction of Western modernities.

References


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