“Each chapter derives its best insights from a broad range of scholarship. This book will appeal to readers coming to its subject matter for the first time. Recommended.”

—Choice

“Historians have generally been slow to recognize how visual images have shaped public understandings of historical issues. Those who have noted this reality have generally dismissed it as an indicator of cultural decline. Mark Moss’s book cogently and systematically explains why historians need to recognize the ways that students and the general public learn history through film, television, and other visual images in the contemporary world. While sensitive to the ways that visual media have distorted historical understanding, Moss’s book makes an extraordinary contribution to the historical literature by illuminating how the visual revolution provides new opportunities for historians to reach broader audiences with their work. All academic historians need to read and think about this book’s message.”

—Wilson Warren, Western Michigan University

Where once the study of the past was books and printed articles, the environment has changed and students now enter the lecture hall with a sense of history that has been gleaned from television, film, photography, and other new media. They come to understand history based on what they have seen and heard, not what they have read.

Mark Moss discusses the impact of visuals on the study of history with an examination of visual culture and the future of print. Recognizing the visual bias of the younger generations and using this as a starting point for teaching history is a critical component for reaching students. By providing an analysis of photography, film, television, and computer culture, Moss uses the Holocaust as a historical case study to illustrate the ways in which visual culture can be used to bring about an awareness of history, as well as the potential for visual culture becoming a driving force for social and cultural change.

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Toward the Visualization of History
This book is dedicated to my mother, Phyllis and my two children, Jesse and Becca.
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When I first began to think about the subject that eventually became this work, I was concerned with my initial assumptions. Having just spent a few years pondering the connection between mass culture and fascism, I was convinced that students, who derived the bulk of their historical knowledge from the products of mass culture, would not be able to make the enlightened decisions necessary for the continued functioning of a liberal democracy. They would in fact, leave themselves and their offspring open to the machinations of totalitarianism or of “friendly fascism.” Then, in 1994 I received the opportunity to teach at a college in Toronto. I was asked to step in and continue a class on war and social change.

Many of the students I had the pleasure to teach brought with them keen insights regarding the nature of history. They asked provocative questions and pursued acute lines of thought. After some probing, I was informed that the majority of their inquiries and most of their foundations of historical knowledge were derived from film and television. The odd student even mentioned a photograph of some historical event—although they could rarely recall the photographer’s name. What this suggested to me was that far from destroying their capacity to understand and process historical knowledge, the mass media, and specifically, the visual media at their disposal, was eminently capable of provoking intellectual discussion on matters related to the past. As well, in revelatory fashion, the singular source of historical awareness that they possessed was the media. Over the past ten years, I have seen this process grow and to an important extent, mature or at least evolve, to a point where I can confidently state
that most of the students in high school and college receive most of their historical knowledge from television, film, photography, and new media. This being said, what I have tried to do as a professor, is to build upon this established “fact” within the classroom.

If this is the case, why not use this form of knowledge as a starting point, a base, to work from? If they are coming to the classroom or lecture hall with a sense of visual history firmly put in place by the visual media, rather than dismissing it as trite or mindless, I felt that it was necessary to use the language that they already possess as a way to get them to appreciate and understand the more established and traditional forms of historical discourse and historiography.

When I began to discuss this idea with some of my colleagues, most of them were uncomfortable with the concept of validating visual forms of mass culture, especially within the confines of traditional academic environments. Most have come around and have acknowledged that it would be a wise move to credit the culture of youth with something—provided certain standards are upheld. The remaining reluctant voices are too petrified to move in this direction. They see this validation as a sell out to the interests of corporatism. By validation, I mean that the products of mass culture can bridge gaps between teachers and learners and can provide for a wonderful introduction to a complex topic. By validation, I also suggest that this visual youth culture comes to the classroom, the tutorial and to the lecture hall, and should not be dismissed simply because it is different from traditional modes of intellectual endeavor.

What is presented in the following pages is not a plea to recognize the usefulness of visual history, but rather an acknowledgment that it is here and will not be going away. I offer sketches and surveys, comparisons and contrasts, anecdotes and facts that trace the growth in importance of this varied method of communicating history. I do this reluctantly. I am not a huge fan of technology in the classroom. I am a traditionalist. Yet I recognize that this is a significant part of the culture of today’s student and that visual culture and all that it entails is key to unlocking the appeal of the past.

Many people have read portions of this book and deserve to be acknowledged for their contributions. These have come in suggestions, revisions, sources, and queries. Maria Vasilodimitrakis read the manuscript with an exacting eye and offered many original and positive criticisms. To her I owe a special debt. Peter Meehan provided support and encouragement. Ourania Kourakis, Rhonda Roth, Gail Strachan, Joy Muller, and Kelly Donaldson provided their time and energy in purveying books and articles for me. Henry Decock, Dave Phillips, Brian Nakata, Doug Hunt, Naomi Herman, Tracy Pogue, Paula Gouveia, Jennipher Yebuga, and Jim Moran also provided assistance, reassurance, and motivation. My former
dissertation advisor David Levine, as well as a number of anonymous readers at various institutions, also deserves acknowledgment. Emily Andrew was an early champion of this idea and her efforts on my behalf are greatly appreciated. Joseph Parry at Lexington books and the staff at Rowman and Littlefield justifiably deserve my praise. Shelly Hornstein of York University’s Faculty of Fine Arts was instrumental in many ways and a special thanks goes to her.

A version of Chapter 3 appeared in the College Quarterly, Summer 2004 and a version of Chapter 7 appeared in the College Quarterly, Fall 2005.

Parts of this work were first given at a number of conferences held over the past few years. Parts of Chapter 2 as “The Gutenberg Revolution,” Plenary Address, presented at CALL (College Association of Language and Literacy) 2000, Orillia, Ontario, June 5–7, 2000; Chapter 6, as “Modern Visual Literacy and Film,” at the same conference. Elements found in the introduction were first presented as “Visualizing the Past: History as Image,” presented at 100 Years of American Mass Culture, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, September 29–October 1, 2000. Significant portions of Chapter 2 were first discussed as “The Past and Future of the Book,” presented at New Perspectives on Popular Culture, Technology and Society, Seneca College, June 23, 2003. And finally, a substantial portion of the final chapter was talked about as “Visualizing History; Computer Technology and the Graphic Presentation of the Past,” presented at The Teaching, Learning and Technology Conference, Ryerson University, November 23–24, 2003.
Introduction

This book is about recognizing the culture of students who are currently in schools, colleges and universities. It is about the “net generation,” “millennial learners,” and their perspectives and mindsets. Young people today enter the classroom with a visual component within their psyche that people over the age of thirty simply do not possess. If they are not completely immersed in the world of the keyboard, than they are extremely comfortable with the television screen as a source of information, the movie theater as a lecture hall, the magazine as a teacher. As one authority has written:

Most students entering our colleges and universities today are younger than the microcomputer, are more comfortable working on a keyboard than writing in a spiral notebook, and are happier reading from a computer screen than from paper in hand.¹

This book is also about sending a message to educators and teachers who are in the class room, the lecture hall or administrative offices. This varied group must be aware of the culture of the learner. They bring to the classroom a mentality that is as different as anything ever experienced in education. They are, for all intents and purposes, a different generation. They are not completely at home with books and with listening. Anyone who has lectured recently knows that after sixty minutes, students grow bored. This is the recognition that I am moving towards.

Yet within education today and within the teaching of history, one must not and cannot lose site of the importance of the written and printed
word. One should also never buy into the fact that the traditional ways of instruction are completely redundant and that lectures and tutorials are superfluous. What is needed is a compromise that benefits both parties and that recognizes the essential aspects of traditional curriculum delivery with an emphasis on the visual nature of society.

One example of this balance in favor of traditional forms of history education comes from Edward Ayers. Ayers suggests that “history is everywhere.” There are thousands of websites, visits to historical places, and even numerous history channels on television. There has also been a plethora of movies devoted to historical subjects and hundreds of games that use history as their base. Yet Ayers (and others) reminds us that poll after poll suggests that young people do not know their history—in this case American—not to mention the history of other nations. This is confirmed in Canada by the Dominion Institute as well as through testing and examination of the curriculum. There is a disconnect from the amount of history available and the fact that students are not learning it—or not learning it properly. Ayers remarks that the human connection between teachers and students is where we can succeed:

In that classroom we can create communities of trust that do not exist in the outside world. We can sustain conversations across weeks and months. We can ask questions that cannot be answered in the span of an hour-long documentary. We can offer coherence and proportion. We can show the importance of sequence and context. We can embody the excitement that engagement with the past can bring.

Professor Ayers writes that “we have no choice but to engage the history pouring in on them.” And this is the point. To utilize what they bring to the classroom, to harness what exists in their world, within the realms of good teaching.

The book begins with a wide-ranging analysis of visual culture and its various manifestations. Everything about contemporary society has a visual component and thus, it does and will affect historical awareness or historical consciousness. From subtle to profound, these changes have enormous pedagogic importance. Chapter 2 discusses how history has evolved to accommodate the visual nature of society. Central to this idea is the fact that individuals gravitate towards the narrative structure of history—the storytelling component of the visual—just as often as popular historians frame history in these terms. The notion of narrative and the concept of the storyteller come primarily from Hayden White and Walter Benjamin, respectively. Chapter 3 involves an in-depth analysis of the past and future and of print culture. It begins by discussing how written culture affected classic oral culture and then continues to describe the way in which the printing press affected reading. A concise historical dialogue
moves into an examination of new technologies and their impact on print culture, libraries and reading. The starting point in any discussion of history inevitably leads to the subject of archival/written documentation. The place of print culture in the future of historical interpretation is thus, extremely relevant and even essential as a foundation for understanding the future of history in the visual world. In Chapter 4 the photograph as a conveyor of historical meaning is illustrated. There is a juxtaposition of photography with painting, as well as a rumination on how the war photograph has become a staple of historical knowledge and a definitive visual conveyor of history. The importance of film is discussed in Chapter 5. Discussion here ranges from documentaries to Hollywood feature films. The following chapter deals with the pervasiveness of television and its role as key disseminator of historical ideas and knowledge in numerous forms. These range from the TV movie of the week, to news and information programs, to the constant appearance of historical tropes in popular entertainment formats. Chapter 7 explores the application of film, photography and televised versions of history to a case study—the Holocaust. Important here is the recognition that these three media have impacted the commemorative forms of history in very significant and unique ways, which force museums and monuments to respond to the visual nature of mediated history. The final chapter delves into the “new media” as purveyors of historical knowledge. With each passing day, the Internet and other forms of computer mediated information, from Web Sites that are interactive to CD-ROMs, devote more and more data to historical renderings. Some of these products are indeed fatuous but many, like the best historical films, can not be dismissed as irrelevant. Some, in fact, must be recognized as having both validity and merit as historical offerings.

NOTES

Ours is the age of the picture. Pictures abound in our newspapers and magazines, in storybooks and on the glossy pages of instruction manuals. We find them on billboards and postage stamps, on the television screen and in the cinema. And in all of these cases pictures inform us: they explain, they clarify, they elucidate—and at times, too, they entertain and delight us. Images on the television screen have all but replaced the printed word as a source of information about the world; and nowadays, too, picture books and comic strips are consulted much more readily, and with much less intellectual effort, than the printed word. There can be little doubt but that pictures have come to play a very important role in communication.

—David Novitz, *Pictures and Their Use in Communication*, xi

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak.

—John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 7

We see naturally. We look without effort. We are born to gaze.¹ The above quotes and ideas encapsulate the argument that many have articulated for some time, but that only recently, has come to the fore as a feature of life; that individuals access images more readily than words.² Seeing is a central feature of modern society and as Mitchell Stevens cogently puts it, “Moving images use our senses more effectively than do black lines of type stacked on white pages.”³ The image, to use contemporary parlance, is “where it’s at.”⁴ The image has not only matured to an
The supremacy of the image is a definitive modern and an iconic postmodern feature of society. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the move towards a graphic based culture was well on its way to eroding the culture of print. Images, ocularity and seeing were everywhere, from department store windows to magazines, to small portable cameras. Not only was the dominance of the visual a quantified fact, but it had an impact on how the individual began to sense his or her environs. As Martin Heidegger recognized in his essay, “The Age of the World Picture,” technology, modernism and society have conflated to put an overriding emphasis on the visual. To perceive of the world in modern society, means, according to Heidegger, that the world has become a picture. The visual nature of society biases the ocular and favors it above all else. It becomes our lingua franca, as illustrated in the way that both music videos and much advertising are easily absorbed and digested across boundaries, without much emphasis on words. The image, whether the photograph or the television picture, has the ability to summarize, condense, and in turn render comprehensible the difficulties of history.

In this work the conception of the past is often intertwined with history—the academic rendering of previous events—and it also merges with aspects of collective memory to form a cornucopia-like recipe that can be described as “historical consciousness,” public commemoration, or popular history. The last appellation is the most all encompassing for it integrates and recognizes the vitality of visual forms of communication at their most powerful.

Brian Plane has made the argument that the technology that brings history to so many, in on-line formats, is simply “inconceivable without the democratization of images.” Plane writes, “The Internet’s efficiency as a reference tool lies in its ability to transmit information in image form as easily as text.” Plane goes on to remark that the plethora of images contained in contemporary textbooks is astonishing. “A 1,000 page textbook,” he observes, “usually contains over one hundred historical maps, and over four hundred historical illustrations, not to mention tables, timelines, and text boxes, which bring colorful images to virtually every textbook page.” The similarities between the contemporary textbook and many Web-based products are quite pronounced. Where Web-based formats have the edge is in accessibility and fluidity.
To some this is problematic and dangerous, to others this is reality. In harmony with mass culture, the visualized emphasis of society becomes the currency by which to express thought. Even more to the point, for many people, most of what they perceive of as life, as history, as society, is in some way or form, a derivative of the image. Even in his or her most intimate thoughts, what an individual understands to be wholly their own, are in fact some composite of image drenched society. Human understanding has come to be defined in the form of visuals. The visuals are all around us, and even within us, and thus it is not so much the pictures themselves but “the modern tendency to picture or visualize existence.” History is often perceived of as a visual composition, one that involves the digestion of myriad visual accoutrements that have been “archived” and are retrievable, and that are capable of being consumed and played over and over again.

Beyond the confines of what goes on in the classroom or in the lecture hall, the subject of history, in its visual, postmodern manifestations, is extremely popular. Historical presentations are highly valued and eagerly watched. Robert Burgoyne feels that many people wish to almost touch history. Burgoyne notes that in Walter Benjamin’s originative essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin suggests that there is a desire for people to “bring things close” and in particular, artifacts or images from the past that possess a patina of culture which imbues them with an aura of veneration. He feels that often this material desire to connect, has an “analogous” parallel today with history, which comes out in numerous historical variations:

In my view, the contemporary desire to re-experience history in a sensuous way speaks to an analogous desire to dispel the aura of the past as object of professional historical contemplation and to restore it to the realm of affective experience in a form that is comparable to sensual memory.

Burgoyne is suggesting that we desire and consume history in a variety of ways, which can range from Civil War recreations in full historical costume, to antique collecting, because it is both more satisfying and significant if it is something palatable and even tangible.

What we have is the convergence of popular history with public history. History in the nineteenth century was often a discourse for the public. The average person in Europe and in parts of North America, who was literate, read history. History was not divisive yet it could be interpreted differently depending on who was writing and when. Significant in this arena was the fact that simply put, history was history. By the 1970s, history had been carved up into numerous disciplines. On the one end was consensus or establishment history while on the other rested the “new”