Panoramic Sites and Civic Unrest in 1790s London

Joshua Swidzinski

University of Portland, swidzins@up.edu
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In 1787, an itinerant Irish painter named Robert Barker patented the panorama: a vast, perfectly circular canvas housed in a specially built rotunda and lit in such a way that observers, viewing it from a central platform, could suppose themselves a part of the seamless, surrounding illusion. The innovation would prove to make Barker’s fortune. In the 1790s, London became a city obsessed with panoramas and this obsession quickly spread to the Continent.1 Immer-sive cityscapes, battle scenes, and exotic locales could be experienced for the price of a shilling, bringing to life what went unillustrated by the newspapers.2 In his comprehensive study of the spectacle, Stephan Oettermann describes Barker’s invention as “the first true visual mass medium” and a key precursor to a number of the visual technologies that would emerge during the nine-teenth century.3 A wealth of recent literary criticism has asked how the panora-ma’s novel manner of “conceptualizing and managing the field of the visible” influenced the Romantic imagination with regard to notions of the sublime.4 By and large, these accounts focus on the panorama’s tendency to model a form of sublimity that disembodies and nationalizes vision. In Mary Favret’s recent for-mulation of this argument, panoramic visions of British victories and imperial possessions “taught the public to ‘see’ and to see as a nation” by “dismantling the priority of the individual viewer and assembling instead a mobilized and nationalized public” whose collective gaze figured the workings of Britain and its empire.5 According to this line of thought, to partake of the panorama is to surrender to a uniquely incorporeal and national logic of vision. By contrast, this article returns to the earliest instances of Barker’s experimentation with the panorama and addresses the medium’s initial concerns with the physical site, in addition to the sight, to which it gathers its observers. Elaborating Denise Blake Oleksijczuk’s recent and salutary contention that the panorama “oper-ated on both intellectual and somatic levels to convey ideologically powerful messages,”6 this article recuperates the bodily politics of Barker’s inaugural panoramas. Not only did these early spectacles conjure sublime visual illu-

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sions, but they also fashioned vexed civic spaces at their center. They could not free the eye without also, significantly, fixing the body.

The importance of the panoramic body emerges from a comparison of the two equally apocryphal stories that seek to account for Barker’s invention of the medium. In the first, while Barker sits comfortably beneath an umbrella and sketches a bright landscape, he suddenly conceives of his umbrella as a frame: a carefully placed circle of shade, he realizes, can domesticate Nature and render its totality viewable.7 The second creation story offers the same epiphany with regard to painterly technique, but it makes this epiphany contingent upon the corporeal status of the painter. That is, instead of placing Barker at leisure in the countryside with his brushes and umbrella, it immures him in solitary confinement in debtors’ prison, where

his cell was so feebly lighted by means of a small air-hole in one of the corners, that the only way in which he could read the letters that came to him was by holding them up at arm’s length against that part of the wall which was opposite to the air-hole. By so doing the words not only became perfectly distinct, but the effect produced was very striking. It then occurred to him that if a picture were placed in a similar position it would produce a still more wonderful effect.8

In this tale, the epiphany of the panorama is born not of intellectual and visual freedom but of physical confinement, not of seeing but of being seen: the constriction of the body makes possible the liberation of the eye. One can only go so far in the analysis of apocrypha. Yet the association, however fanciful, between the panorama and incarceration invites a comparison between Barker’s invention and another creation of 1787, Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon penitentiary:

The building is circular. The apartments of the prisoners occupy the circumference. You may call them, if you please, the cells. . . . The apartment of the inspector occupies the centre; you may call it if you please the inspector’s lodge. It will be convenient in most, if not all cases, to have a vacant space or area all round, between such centre and such circumference. . . . Each cell has in the outward circumference, a window, large enough, not only to light the cell, but, through the cell, to afford light enough to the correspondent part of the lodge.9

The similarity between Barker’s theater of immersion and Bentham’s architecture of inspection invites us to extend to the analysis of the panorama the same concern for body and space that predominates in critical accounts of the panopticon.10 Barker, like Bentham, spends the final years of the eighteenth century experimenting with a kind of panoptic vision; this essay takes as its starting point the assumption that Barker, like his fellow innovator, equally has the organization of bodies in mind.11

The aims of this article are two-fold. First, it narrates the history of how
Barker’s inaugural panoramas mobilized and situated London bodies, and it suggests that where these viewers stood may perhaps have been more important than what they saw. Whereas many scholars tend to read Barker’s early panoramic experiments as “modern” visions that disembodify and nationalize sight, this essay explores the physical sites of Barker’s panoramas and the local history of popular unrest (riots, forcible conscription, and imprisonment) with which these spaces engage. I suggest that the critical tendency to theorize this medium in terms of disembodied and nationalized vision, while a generative approach to the longer history of the panorama, is ill suited for capturing the situational, bodily politics of its inaugural experiments. In his early panoramas, Barker is less concerned to model a ghostly, imperial gaze than to gather London crowds upon reimagined sites of popular unrest. Secondly, relying upon accounts contemporaneous with the panorama’s early reception, this article reconsiders the spectacle’s literary influence and reputation. The critical penchant to read the panorama within or against the category of the sublime overlooks the medium’s early history, when it equally could serve to express public resentment in the face of forms of civic coercion. Barker’s first panoramas exhibit a generic duplicity: they may be sublime spectacles, but they are also theaters of discontent. In this respect, their early history revises our understanding of the panorama’s generic possibilities, for it suggests that the medium’s innovative poetics of vision are implicated in, and perhaps even contested by, the manner in which the medium stages bodies.

THE PANORAMIC CROWD

In *The Prelude* (1805), William Wordsworth’s brief encounter with the panorama leads him to reflect upon the supremacy of the imagination. Although the ambitions of the panoramic artist may deserve praise, the panorama itself only spurs the poet gently to satirize those “imitations fondly made in plain / Confession of man’s weakness and his loves.” Yet despite his dismissal of the medium, Wordsworth offers a fair account of the thematic concerns of the panorama at the turn of the century. He writes of

> those mimic sights that ape
> The absolute presence of reality,
> Expressing as in mirror sea and land,
> And what earth is, and what she hath to shew

> [Wherein] the Painter—fashioning a work
> To Nature’s circumambient scenery,
> And with his greedy pencil taking in
> A whole horizon on all sides—with power
> Like that of angels or commissioned spirits,
THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Plant[s] us upon some lofty pinnacle,
Or in a ship on waters, with a world
Of life and lifelike mockery to east,
To west, beneath, behind us, and before.14

Wordsworth here alludes to two rigidly conventionalized sights first instituted by Barker: the urban and the naval prospect. Inevitably during the 1790s, to visit a panorama was to find oneself amid a cityscape (atop “some lofty pinnacle”) or a fleet (“in a ship on waters”). The unerring loyalty of panoramic artists to these two subjects is striking, and for well over a decade there seems little interest in painting anything else. A typical handbill advertises both a depiction of the Third Battle of Ushant—“The Public are respectfully informed, that the PANORAMA opens every day at Ten o’clock, with a Representation of every Ship in the British and French Fleets, as they appeared at One P.M. on that day”—and a reminder to take in a cityscape—“This Scene will continue open, as usual, in the Panorama . . . Likewise the New View of London, highly finished in Oil Colours.”15 So natural or necessary seemed this pairing of cityscape and fleet that Barker’s exhibition hall would eventually enclose two tiers, which made it possible for both of these panoramic sights to be indulged in one location.16

Why these same views, again and again? The simplest answer, of course, is financial in nature: the cityscape and the sight of the fleet were known and successful commodities. Barker’s View of London from the Roof of the Albion Mills (1791) and View of the Grand Fleet Moored at Spithead (1793), the two inaugural uses of the panoramic medium, proved so economically viable that the most cursory of imitation by his competitors was all but assured. Such imitations propelled the medium into the next century, forging its reputation as a vehicle of cheap, mass verisimilitude. Clearly Barker had instituted a visual experience that fulfilled a set of desires on the part of the viewing public. Yet one must ask how the subsequent bids to capitalize on Barker’s invention, which tended simply to reiterate these initial sights in more exotic locales, obscured the local factors that first shaped the London public’s response to the panorama.

Scholars risk engaging with these sights ahistorically when they address the symbolic or formal properties of panoramic observation at the expense of the medium’s corporeal context. Questions of panoramic sight—what is seen, and in what way—frequently elide the question of a panorama’s site, or its placement of an observational body in physical and social circumstances. Notions of isolation and abstraction routinely underlie these accounts. The panorama “is a sign of [the observer’s] own power, his ability to stand outside and above the image and in fact to transcend the sublime”;17 scholars characterize it as “a machine for disillusionment, a spectacle of illusion clarified. It was the enlightenment, open every day, Sunday excepted, for a shilling.”18 According to this view, the panorama either allows vision to depart from the body altogether to
“stand outside and above” the fray, or it amplifies vision in the manner of a microscope or telescope, thereby isolating the perceptual faculty from its bodily context. In either case, it is assumed that the medium radically isolates and disembodies vision and that, by extension, Barker’s panoramas aim to transform each member of the crowd into a spectral, singular eye.

As a result, such a view can risk overlooking the presence and priorities of the crowd. Barker’s invention was not merely a medium but a landmark, a rotunda in Leicester Square that doubled as a common London meeting place. Contemporary accounts routinely group the panorama with other public venues such as Drury Lane, Vauxhall, and the pantomimes—as well as, occasionally, the crowded confines of Bedlam and Newgate prison. Moreover, the panorama’s 30-foot wide viewing platform (at the center of the building’s 90-foot rotunda) was no lone garret with a view. Though smaller than the Haymarket’s auditorium (roughly 46 feet in depth by 52 in width), it was nonetheless comparable in size to one of London’s smaller theatrical venues. In this respect, Barker’s panorama was a gathering place where, as in the other theaters, one inevitably jostled with fellow spectators. In the months following Barker’s first panorama, some humorous verses published in the Public Advertiser (1791) have little to say of the sublime and are instead concerned with the Leicester Square establishment as a site of public amusement. The writer recounts his being blindfolded and guided by a woman up to panorama’s viewing platform:

I trod on her train, and disgrumpl’d her clothes,  
And in turning short round, got a knock on the nose—  
And the people all laugh’d, as I found by the rumour,  
Which to tell you the truth, put me quite out of humour.

The panorama may have been an innovation, but its attendees were still the same Londoners who engaged in sideshows and arguments in the pit at Drury Lane, and who considered the theater not only a place to see but to be seen. To essentialize the experience of the panorama based upon the medium’s visual properties is to obscure the role played by the bodily presence of its attendees.

Critical preoccupation with the panorama’s potential to isolate and disembodied vision stems from the medium’s superficial likeness to another Enlightenment-era illusory device, the camera obscura. Scholarly accounts of the panorama often cite Jonathan Crary, whose genealogical study of vision and modernity adduces the camera obscura—a device similarly concerned with immersing its spectator—in order to narrate the historical development of observation. “During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,” he argues, the device “was without question the most widely used model for explaining human vision, and for representing the relation of a perceiver and the position of a knowing subject to an external world.” For Crary, this predominance inaugurated a new understanding of the observer’s body, since
the *camera obscura* is inseparable from a certain metaphysics of interiority: it is a figure for both the observer who is nominally a free sovereign individual and a privatized subject confined in a quasi-domestic space, cut off from a public exterior world. . . . At the same time, another related and equally decisive function of the camera was to sunder the act of seeing from the physical body of the observer, to decorporealize vision.26

According to Crary, these two novel traits—privatization and decorporealization—comprise the starting point of vision’s modernity since they render sight exchangeable, ultimately allowing for the “codification and normalization of the observer within rigidly defined systems of visual consumption.”27 This modern perception of sight’s exchangeability, moreover, increasingly renders the observational site superfluous to one’s understanding of vision. Once sight becomes, in modern thought, a reproducible process rather than a unique geographical event, the site of observation—that is, both the observer’s body and this body’s spatial context—grows increasingly devoid of significance.28

The eagerness with which scholars have theorized the panorama along these same lines testifies to the persuasiveness of Crary’s views. Nonetheless, such an approach obscures the degree to which Barker’s early experiments with the panorama remain embedded in their spatial context and resist explanation under Crary’s model. Revealingly, Barker seeks to disassociate the effect of the panorama from that of the *camera obscura* and its un-situated sight. In both of the cited advertisements for his inaugural panoramas (which I discuss below), Barker takes particular care to describe the means of production. His declaration in 1791 that “the Observers of this Picture [are], by Painting only, so deceived, as to Suppose themselves” at its actual location is echoed in 1793 by the assurance that “every Object appears as large as Reality, by effect of the Pencil only.”29 As Oettermann notes, this insistent disclosure of the painter’s tools primarily reflects a desire to distinguish the wholly human artifice of the panorama from the mechanical aid of the *camera obscura*.30 Barker does not simply traffic in disembodied sight—he is also keen to remind the spectators that they are witnessing a particular kind of craft, the collective feat of painters, architects, builders, and canvas workers. Whereas the Enlightenment observer is taught by devices such as the *camera obscura* to perceive him- or herself to be a singular “free-floating inhabitant of the darkness, a marginal supplementary presence independent of the machinery of representation,”31 Barker’s early panoramas make no efforts to isolate the observer from his or her fellows, nor to conceal the human labor of representation. Even Wordsworth acknowledges these facts. His assertion that the panoramic painter, “Like that of angels or commissioned spirits, / Plant[s] us upon some lofty pinnacle” stresses the bodily, the plural, and the situational.32 The painter only—not the observer—is
likened to a free-floating spirit. The viewer remains, pointedly, a corporeal presence in Wordsworth’s description—a thing fixed in place and fixed en masse (for the medium “Plant[s] us upon some lofty pinnacle”). To admit, then, a set of historically situated spectators into Barker’s viewing rotunda invites us to address not only the historicity of the sights but also the theatrical effect of the sites conjured up by the first panoramas.

“DARK SATANIC MILLS”

In June of 1791, The Morning Chronicle advertised what would become Barker’s first success:

> The Public are most respectfully informed, that the Subject at present of the Panorama is a View, at one glance, of the Cities of London and Westminster, comprehending the Three Bridges, represented in One Painting, containing 1479 square feet, which appears as large, and in every respect the same as reality. The Observers of the Picture being, by Painting only, so deceived, as to suppose themselves on the Albion Mills, from whence the view was taken.33

Although View of London from the Roof of Albion Mills has not survived, an engraving made by Frederick Birnie conveys a sense of this inaugural panorama (see Fig. 1). A world of commerce predominates: the mill itself takes up nearly half of the spectacle, while the traffic of the Thames and Blackfriars Bridge fills out much of the remaining space. London and its environs seem almost to comprise a distant backdrop, an afterthought in a world of industry. The choice of Albion Mill for the panorama’s viewpoint is particularly noteworthy in this regard. Built between 1783 and 1786, the factory was the first in the world purpose-built to employ steam power and soon became a tourist destination in its own right, a grand symbol—at least to British eyes—of the nation’s technological supremacy.34

Discussion of Barker’s panorama routinely frames his choice of viewpoint in light of such apparent symbolism. For example, Oettermann glosses the work by writing that “Barker presented the British with the view from London, the capital of their empire and largest city in the Western world, from the roof of a modern factory. Apart from great national monuments . . . what struck the eye was the smoke rising from factory chimneys and the great number of ships on the Thames, symbols of Britain’s supremacy in industry, trade, and naval power.”35 Many scholars generalize this line of interpretation in order to define the nature of the medium more broadly: “all of these were celebrations of national victories or inventories of national cultural achievement.”36 Barker’s choice of Albion Mill comes to seem paradigmatic for the medium as a whole. The critical genealogy that construes the panoramic gaze as a mechanism of nationalism habitually traces its lineage back to these smoke stacks, to the sublime triumphalism they supposedly symbolize.
Fig. 1: Henry Aston Barker and Frederick Birnie, after Robert Barker, *Panoramic View of London* (London, 1792–93), hand-colored aquatint. Courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.
However, such an approach occludes the highly contested character of this mill in the eyes of the London public. The advertisement in June of 1791 for a spectacle that would allow observers “to suppose themselves on the Albion Mill” would have been greeted with some surprise—for the mill burnt to the ground in March of that year in a fire popularly attributed to arson.\(^37\) The history of the mill cannot be separated from the popular suspicion and discontent that surrounded it for the duration of its short existence. It was variously assumed that the mill was responsible for increasing the price of flour, for putting traditional millers out of work, and for selling the populace shoddy corn.\(^38\) Critics were convinced that the institution wielded a monopoly whereby “the Buyers of the Albion Mills had a Power of regulating both the London and Country Markets where they went to, in any manner they thought proper.”\(^39\) Its proprietors were accused of underselling the other millers, or of selling flour “on an express condition that [it] should be exported to foreign parts.”\(^40\) Testifying before the House of Lords, a dealer in corn “ventur[e]s to affirm, that of all the Mills in England that I ever was in, and I have been in a great many, no Corn was ever manufactured worse than that was; more to the Injury of the Proprietors, and of course to the Publick.”\(^41\)

Ultimately, as B. E. Maidment notes, the Albion Mill “came to represent, in the popular consciousness at least, a classic case of machinery destroying the need for a larger labour force.”\(^42\) As a result, its destruction was swiftly attributed to a public anxious and angry about technological and economic coercion. Many scholars have been tempted to associate this site with those “dark Satanic Mills” imagined by William Blake, who became a resident of Lambeth in time to watch the mill burn down and who would have passed its ruins “every time he walked into the City.”\(^43\) Even before unveiling the panorama, then, Barker was already promising his attendees the impossible—not only a visual illusion, but a physical re-creation of this charred, contested site.\(^44\)

When notions of sublimity play a role in the public discourse surrounding the mill, they are often grounded in fears of anonymity and unverifiability rather than Wordsworth’s supremacy of the imagination. These qualms arose soon after the fire, when the mill’s owners published a defense of their destroyed enterprise. It begins by declaring that

> the Proprietors of the Albion Mill knowing from whence and from what Description of Persons the many invidious Paragraphs and malicious Insinuations against their Conduct have originated; and knowing also how much easier it is to rouse than to appease popular Phrensy, have hitherto forborne to offer any Vindication of their Proceedings, relying on the Purity of their Intentions, and the indubitable Advantage of the Mills to the Public, for a Refutation of the Calumnies which have so falsely and so wickedly circulated against them.\(^45\)

Tabulating wheat and flour prices and refuting calumnies methodically, the publication recurs to a rhetoric of omniscience and self-evident fact. It seeks to
clarify and taxonomize “popular Phrensy”—to assert material knowledge of the precise descriptions and locations of this frenzy’s agitators. In this regard, the rhetoric of the proprietors aspires to the sort of triumphalist omniscience often attributed to the panorama, whose “remorseless lucidity” is said to be “not so much a faithful copy of the city ‘out there’ as an idealized imitation of what could be seen only by an omniscient viewer.” Nonetheless, the fate of the Albion Mill reminds us that such omniscience is not neutral: the proprietors’ claim to a lucid and totalizing gaze is explicitly positioned against a murky, anonymous “popular Phrensy” that threatens to elude just such a gaze.

Tellingly, these *topoi* persist in public discourse concerning the mill. In 1800, the bid to establish another vast manufactory under the name of the London Flour, Meal, and Bread Company led to renewed fears of a monopoly and stirred up memories of the Albion Mill. In the debates in Parliament regarding this potential establishment, the specter of the old charred factory near Blackfriars Bridge is forcefully present. At moments, fears of a murky anonymity seem even to blur the distinction between the proprietors and the public. Of the list of owners provided for the new company, John Fane, Earl of Westmoreland, remarks:

> We know . . . the list on the table; but I wish to see the invisible list that remains behind. We do not know of what description the remaining proprietors may be . . . Many of the persons on the list are known to be men of character and integrity. Are they all so? Can you answer for the remainder? . . . Is it not a possible case, that it may come even into the hands of factious persons, who may use it to the worst purposes? Surely it is a most unwise thing to erect so gigantic an establishment under the eyes of the people. The Albion Mill was nothing in comparison with it.47

While voicing his fear that the establishment would be “under the eyes of the people,” Westmoreland employs, if only inadvertently, an ambiguous turn of phrase. Although its dominant sense is that the factory’s inner workings would be, dangerously, beyond the public’s view, his word choice also lends itself to a scenario in which danger somehow resides in the establishment’s inner workings being *in* the public view—under the eyes of the crowd. This fearful notion of an omniscient mob (fearful, at least, for this member of the House of Lords) recurs throughout the discourse surrounding Albion Mill and its role in the London community. A contemporary book of quips leverages the threat of anonymous mob violence against the proposed factory: “A gentleman asked another, what he thought of the new monopoly of Millers, founded on the ruins of the Albion Mill Company. ‘I think,’ replied the other, ‘that, like the Albion Mills, it will probably *end in smoke*.’” The visual logic of the mill’s vantage point cannot be extricated from its contentious, local context. The omniscient gaze of the mill’s oligarchic proprietors constitutes a response to the fearful notion of a diffuse, democratic one—to the sort of collective anonymity out of which “popular Phrensy” and insurrection arise.
The peculiarly plural fears associated with the site of Albion Mill necessarily color our understanding of Barker’s first cityscape and the role played by its attendees. As Oettermann reminds us, the panoramic omniscience is designed to be a plural one. It abolishes and diffuses the privileged spectatorial position of the “royal box,” instead offering the same view to all for the uniform price of a shilling. Reinforcing the uniquely democratic nature of his new medium, Barker’s panorama mobilizes its spectators upon the very site that the city’s workers were presumed to have mobilized against and destroyed by dint of their collective anonymity. In effect, during the same winter months that Barker and his workers massed together to construct this pluralizing spectacle, another rumored mass conspired, in its own way, to diffuse the power centered at Albion Mill—to render its closed, private spaces open to public viewing.

To the tourist such as Wordsworth, Barker’s first cityscape may seem to traffic in omniscience for the sake of leisure; for the London public, however, the spectacle also re-enacts the dismantling of a privileged omniscience. It invites the civic body to view its own anonymous handiwork—to trespass, again and again, onto the private site it had collectively abolished.

THE RUSSIAN ARMAMENT

In Barker’s first panoramas, the gathering of bodies is not simply a function of the artistic apparatus but also the focus of its gaze. The viewing platform, in theatrical terms, is capable of serving both as auditorium and stage. In 1793, to inaugurate his new, purpose-built exhibition rotunda, Barker chose for the subject of his second, much vaster panorama a contentious staging of bodies—the “Russian Armament” of 1791. The advertisement announces:

The present Subject is a View of the Grand Fleet, moored at Spithead, being the Russian Armament in 1791, taken from the Centre, together with Portsmouth, the Isle of Wight, and entire surrounding objects.—The painting, by Mr. Barker, contains above Ten Thousand Square Feet, and every Object appears as large as Reality, by Effect of the Pencil only. . . . Ships of the Line are Thirty-Six, and are true Portraits. The centre Frigate, where Company are supposed to stand, is the Iphigenia.

The absence of any attempt on Barker’s part to detail the political circumstances of the fleet’s mobilization or to speak to its intended military purpose—historical points I will explore shortly—only indicates how unnecessary these details were to his intended audience. Barker’s panoramic verisimilitude traffics in the re-creation of a specific moment in public memory, an event that is precisely dateable and knowable. Provided gratis with an index of the panorama’s sights, the crowd is encouraged to test the panorama against its own knowledge and to judge of its veracity. Oettermann opines that “many visitors
would be history buffs, and some might actually have taken part in the battle themselves. . . . The slightest inaccuracy would be noticed. . . . Sailors would point out errors in the mast and rigging of ships.” Barker’s early panoramas invite the public to review something that it already in some sense knows. In these first experiments with the medium, the goal is not reducible to a generalizable effect of visual sublimity; rather, its significance is contingent upon the spectators’ knowledge of and relationship with the specific event depicted.

Such specificity is often wanting in critical accounts of the medium, which paradigmatically construe such nautical depictions as uncomplicatedly patriotic depictions. Historians venture that “the Royal Navy, the largest in the world at the time, was dear to the nation’s heart,” and as a result that “the panorama ceased to be just one form of entertainment among others in the mind of the British public; it succeeded in linking itself with patriotism and national pride.” This notion, something of an idée reçue in the critical reception of the medium, lends itself to an erasure of agency. Once it is assumed that “all of these [panoramas] were celebrations of national victories,” it then becomes possible to speak of “the panorama’s self-construction as an improving and patriotic venture.” Descriptions of the medium that stress its “self-construction” or its success at “linking itself” to abstract national sentiment elide the historical context of the panoramic event and its spectators; in this light, the panorama is neither constructed nor viewed by bodies, but is instead a free-floating visual process, an exchangeable token of patriotism. Absent from these accounts is the effect of the crowd’s participation, or the possibility that the presence of bodies on the faux terrain of H. M. S. Iphigenia’s deck stages something necessary to, but absent from, the panoramic canvas. Barker’s choice of the Russian Armament does not simply depict a contentious mobilization of bodies—it also stages such a mobilization, conscripting the attendees to serve as historical actors in addition to their presence as observers.

The Russian Armament to which Barker refers so laconically in his advertisement denotes both a fleet and a political crisis. In 1791, a British trade route through the Black Sea was threatened by Russia’s war with Turkey; in an attempt to exert pressure on Russia to halt its advance on the key port of Ochakov, the British threatened to launch an expedition into the Baltic, and thus began mobilizing a fleet at Spithead as a sign of force. However, by the time of the panorama’s advertisement in 1793, the “Russian Armament” could not help but connote the conspicuous failure of this political bluff—for ultimately there would be no expedition. Russia blithely continued its advance, buoyed by the knowledge that popular (specifically, mercantile) sentiment in Britain was overwhelmingly against war. Paul L. C. Webb relates that “opposition to an active policy [against Russia] spread through both City and country, seriously threatening, in the view of some, the strength and popularity of Pitt. The national reaction backed up the claim made by one Whig that ‘the country throughout have told Mr Pitt they will not go to war.’” As a result,
this “impressive fleet floated sublime but impotently” off Spithead for the
duration of the campaigning season, a wasteful and embarrassing expenditure
of the nation’s funds.60 This irony was not lost on the panorama’s spectators—
the Morning Post (1794) jests that “the Panorama is a most sarcastic exhibition
against Government, because, though justly, it represents our grand Fleet as
stationary.”61

This popular displeasure arose in part from the controversial manner in
which the British Navy mobilized its bodies. Oettermann notes, almost genially,
that sailors in attendance at the panorama would point out errors in the mast
and rigging of a painted ship. However, he elides the manner in which many of
these sailors would have gained such knowledge—that is, by being impressed
against their will into naval service. Impressment, or the forcible conscription
of sailors (and, as the situation demanded it, landmen), reached its zenith in the
1790s;62 the roaming press gang armed with clubs became a fact of daily life, an
institutional force to be evaded at all cost. As Daniel James Ennis notes, “after a
reprieve in the 1770s when the numbers [of sailors] were reduced to 18,000, the
combination of the American and French Revolutions led to the navy’s convul-
sive growth: in 1781, 90,000 men; in 1783, 100,000; in 1802, 135,000.”63 Nicholas
Rogers estimates that of such rapidly increasing numbers, some “40 per cent or
more . . . were coerced into the navy.”64 The final years of the eighteenth century
witnessed a prolonged terror in England, one that demanded the constriction
of individual bodies for the sake of national liberty.65

The pervasiveness of impressment complicates any attempt to read the pan-
orama as a straightforward instance of patriotic sublimity. Barker’s Leicester
Square rotunda, only half a mile from the Thames, would have been regularly
swept for conscripts along with London’s other entertainment districts;66 and
in London’s newspapers, advertisements for the panorama appeared alongside
descriptions of violent encounters with the press gang.67 For every viewer of
Barker’s panorama who enjoys the freedom of decorporealized omniscience,
there exists another who—whether an erstwhile target of the press gang, or
merely a spectator to its violent, public ritual—sees in the fleet arrayed at Spit-
head a corporeal sight, a site of imprisonment. “No man will be a sailor who has
contrivance enough to get himself into a jail,” Samuel Johnson famously quips,
“for being in a ship is being in a jail, with the chance of being drowned.”68 The
link between prison and the Royal Navy that permeates eighteenth-century
discourse is not restricted to analogy. Advocating against impressment in 1728,
James Oglethorpe relates that “the PREST PERSON is assaulted and seized on
the King’s high way, and hurried into a floating prison, without being allowed
to speak or write to his friends;” and if he has no ready money with which
to buy a reprieve, “he is infallibly put on board the smack, which is a vessel
fitted up like a prison, with iron grates and bolts.”69 The discourse that forms
around the controversy of impressment routinely recurs to the idea of the ab-
sent body—either the body that is taken, or the body that evades:
A poor fellow who perhaps hath six or seven children, and makes hard shifts to bring them up, by labouring in lighters, fishing-boats, or plying as a waterman, and is not willing to leave his family to go a long voyage, is the first who is thus laid hold of; while the single man, who is fittest for the Sea, can leave his place of abode, and hide himself till the press Warrants are called in, or else go into Foreign service, and often times the father of a hopeful family is hurried into a King’s ship or press-smack, and his children immediately left without subsistence to seek charity.

In the world of the press gang, the body, whether taken or not, is rendered increasingly peripheral: it must either flee the civic sphere or be sent from it, to war at the margins of the nation’s map.

It proved all but impossible for traditional forms of entertainment such as the stage to represent these absent bodies to the public. The playbook for the November 24, 1794, production of John O’Keeffe’s *The World in a Village* makes a point of assuring its customers that “Lieutenant Kelley, Lieutenant King, and Lieutenant Bevis, Pledge their Words of Honour, that no Seaman whatever shall be molested by their People, on Play Nights, from the Hours of Four in the Afternoon to Six the following Morning, after which time the indulgence ceases.” This sort of plenary indulgence only sets into relief the status quo—namely, that public spectacles of any kind routinely served the function of corralling able bodies for the press gang. To gaze, in these years, at bodies on stage or figures represented on a canvas was to risk being gazed at by the institutional eye of impressment. As a result, sites of mass entertainment increasingly became sites of evasion—havens for bodies when the Admiralty felt indulgent or, more often, hazards when the press was on. (Oettermann’s picturesque notion of sailors knowingly pointing out errors in a panoramic ship’s masts and rigging presumes that the sailors could actually risk being present in the first place.) During the war years of the 1790s, it is the stage’s inability to represent impressment that proves most revealing. Ennis remarks that “the story of impressment drama at the close of the eighteenth century is, quite simply, that there is none. The genre could not accommodate the contradictions of presenting such a controversial topic onstage at a time when the nation needed men at all costs.” In its stead, spectacles of patriotism and exoticism would predominate—precisely those themes with which the panoramic medium would eventually become synonymous, and which often guide its critical reception.

By contrast, the early panorama was uniquely positioned to stage this absence to the public. Barker’s choice of subject is particularly revealing in this regard, since he selects a sight that was itself a spectacle of absence, evasion, and dissent. Having arrived in London from Edinburgh in 1789, Barker would have witnessed first-hand two memorable mobilizations: the 1790 Nootka Crisis with Spain, and the 1791 crisis with Russia. The former—a political coup for Prime Minister William Pitt and the nation, and an efficient example of naval
organization—could equally have filled Barker’s vast canvas and admission coffers; however, he chose the latter, with its attendant political embarrassment and, notably, its problem of absent bodies. Though the ships were in place, manpower “was a problem, for, after the Nootka armament, the number of available seamen had been reduced from 50,000 to 24,000. Admiralty generosity was partly to blame, because pressed men with good prospects of jobs were allowed to depart and, in the ensuing stampede, ‘some ships were left so weak as not to have a sufficient number of men to take care of them at Spithead.’”74 As a result, the months between May and August of 1791 witnessed a concerted search for absent and evasive bodies.75 Barker’s newly adopted London, always the center in such affairs, would have been swarmed by press gangs hunting up “recruits.”76

This hunt, however, was conspicuously unsuccessful: “Only four [ships] of the line were said to be ready for service, and 12,000 more men were needed. . . . Though four frigates cruised the Channel to meet incoming ships, even the press at Portsmouth was disappointing. Seamen took the [king’s offer of a] bounty as a timely warning and were careful to avoid being afloat when press gangs were likely to strike.”77 In other words, Barker chose for his first, full-scale panorama not merely a political embarrassment, but a fleet notoriously unmanned. For many of its attendees, Barker’s vision of the naval prowess arrayed at Spithead would have doubled as a site of conspicuous bodily absence. It effectively mobilized its viewers to fill this same absence, confining them briefly for the price of a shilling (the same amount paid to men upon their being impressed).78 In this respect, the spectrality of the sublime vision is itself a kind of satire. Whereas newspaper accounts of the panorama explicitly use the sight to mock the government’s incompetence—“Lord Chatham, the First Lord of the Admiralty, visits the Panorama generally twice a week, and is now from his studies there, become a great proficient in Maritime affairs”79—Barker’s vast canvas and its steady gathering of mock-conscripts need only of fer its jest silently. Like his earlier cityscape, Barker’s panorama of the fleet conjures not only a vision but also a vexed political space, allowing the London crowd to trespass upon a site of institutional coercion that it itself had dismantled through popular unrest and evasion.

In his later panoramas, Barker did little to capitalize on the political possibilities inherent in the way the medium aggregates bodies. Indeed, before the decade was out, he had ceded management of the company to his son Henry Aston Barker, under whose supervision the famous Leicester Square rotunda would come to exhibit precisely the sorts of patriotic vistas that we now associate with panoramic sublimity. Although the nineteenth-century panorama would perfect the nationalizing logic of vision that has become synonymous with this medium, a deeper understanding of the panorama’s political possibilities requires that we reconsider Barker’s initial experiments and their rich capacity to foster not only sublime and patriotic sights but also sites of dissent.
NOTES

6. When discussing the “somatic,” Denise Blake Oleksijczuk is largely concerned with “the spatial and temporal disjunctions the panorama created” for its viewers, as well as how these disjunctions, by “encourag[ing] spectators to see themselves as participants in the countless linkages and networks being established between the metropolis and the wider world,” carried imperialist implications (*The First Panoramas: Visions of British Imperialism* [Minneapolis and London, 2011], 2–3).
7. See Oettermann, 39.
12. For a thorough consideration of how the panorama bridges early modern and modern theories of vision, see Oleksijczuk, 67–88.
18. Ellis, 144.
23. Public Advertiser no. 17859 (1 October 1791).
24. Oleksijczuk, 86.
27. Crary, 18.
29. Morning Herald no. 3340 (23 June 1791); Panorama, Leicester-Square [Handbill] (London, 1793).
30. Oettermann, 29.
31. Crary, 41.
33. Morning Herald no. 3340 (23 June 1791).
36. Brewer, 233. See also Oleksijczuk, 16.
37. Although it is now generally accepted that the mill caught fire due to a mechanical malfunction, the rumor of arson was all but taken as fact. In a note to his Botanic Garden, which includes a glowing description of the mill’s steam-powered mechanism, Erasmus Darwin laments that the mill “is supposed to have been set on fire by interested and malicious incendiaries, and is burnt to the ground” (see Additional Note 11 in Erasmus Darwin, The Botanic Garden, 2 vols. [London, 1791], 1:22; Additional Notes are separately paginated). For a thorough account, see B. E. Maidment, Reading Popular Prints: 1790–1870 (Manchester, 2001), 27–52.
38. “All the inhabitants of London and Westminster,” writes J. S. Girdler in 1800, “who can remember anything, must remember, for many of them felt . . . that the Albion Mills Company, so far from being a benefit, was the means of advancing the prices of Meal and Bread” (Observations . . . and reflections on the act lately passed for incorporating the London Flour, Meal, and Bread Company [London, 1800], 85–86). The increase, in fact, was likely caused by a rise in the price of wheat (Bennett, 12).
41. House of Lords, 33.
42. Maidment, 30.
44. Barker, having sent his son to prepare sketches during the winter of 1790–91, could not have foreseen the destruction of his selected viewpoint; nonetheless, the prominence he gives Albion Mill in his advertising campaign reveals no unwillingness to capitalize on this new development in its controversial public narrative. Although scholars acknowledge the relationship between the viewing position and the political unrest surrounding the mill, the possibility that the unrest could seriously inform Barker’s panorama does not enter into their interpretations of the View of London. See Ellis, 139–40; Oleksijczuk, 56–58; and Otto, Multiplying Worlds: Romanticism, Modernity, and the Emergence of Virtual Reality (Oxford, 2011), 40–41.


46. Brewer, 237.


48. New Joe Miller; or, the Tickler (London, 1800), 189.

49. Oettermann, 23–24.

50. Attempts to rebuild a new mill at the same site bore no fruit. As a result, some of the land did indeed revert to public ownership; a park now stands upon the spot west of Blackfriars Road.

51. As Oleksijczuk argues, we must be receptive to the panorama’s ability to foster both “overt and covert forms of storytelling” (24).


53. Ellis notes of the London cityscape, “it is as if the day is dateable: and indeed, at a much later date, Barker’s son claimed that the ‘scene on the Thames was the Lord Mayor’s procession by water to Westminster on the 9th of November’” (138).

54. Oettermann, 60. For a thorough discussion of these indices, see Oleksijczuk, 127–72.

55. Oettermann, 52.

56. Oettermann, 107. Oleksijczuk, despite acknowledging the political complexity surrounding the Russian Armament, concurs with this view (69).

57. Brewer, 233; Ellis, 141.


59. Webb, 27.

60. Webb, 29.

61. Morning Post no. 6528 (24 March 1794).


63. Ennis, 32.


65. Rogers notes that “the Admiralty . . . had an increasingly capacious view of who it could take in and . . . that could mean pretty much anyone who had some aptitude with small craft on a river” (8). For a recent discussion of this topic, see Denver Brunsman, The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World (Charlottesville, 2013).

66. Rogers, 9.

67. For example, a column in the Morning Post advertises “a Panorama of the Allied Armies” beneath a report that “Monday a Recruiting Party, which paraded the streets for the purpose of enlisting Foreigners, and who wore White Cockades, were stopped near Westminster Bridge by the populace. Their Cockades were torn from their hats and trampled under foot amid the acclamations of the Multitude” (no. 6554 [23 April 1794]).


70. Oglethorpe, 22–23.


72. Rogers, 9.

73. Ellis, 106.


75. Webb, 24.

76. “London was always the principal recruiting ground during the phoney wars of 1770–71, 1789 and 1790–91, when the Admiralty ordered quick sweeps of the Thames and the quays around Wapping, and when London magistrates responded to the drive by impressing a larger number of stragglers from the streets. The result was that the resistance to impressment was strongest there during those mobilizations” (Rogers, 54–55).


78. See Ennis, 28.