



## Whitman's Power of Visual Representation in Leaves of Grass: A Proto-Cinematic Gaze and the Influence of Modern Technology

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses Whitman's power of visual representation in *Leaves of Grass*, attempting to link the notion of a proto-cinematic gaze to a more general concern with the influence of modern technology on Whitman's poetic vision. Whitman's observation, like a camera producing the immediate photographic impression of the crowd, emerges as a form of collective memory or a corporeal perception of mass, and claims omnipresence in the poet's visual activity that records the changing landscape of the United States. The central argument is based on two significant elements of Whitman's poetics which help *Leaves of Grass* revolutionize American modern poetry: the flâneur and his camera eye. Through the flâneur's camera eye, mixed with his special techniques of observation, Whitman's reader is drawn to the poet's astonishing combination of verbal and visual modes, which, though intensely lyrical, evokes the strength of poetic graphic power.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses Whitman's power of visual representation in *Leaves of Grass*, attempting to link the notion of a proto-cinematic gaze to a more general concern with the influence of modern technology on Whitman's poetic vision. As Whitman spent his life writing *Leaves of Grass*, which maps the changing landscape of America and goes through nine editions from 1855 to 1892, the development of technology also advances over the years. Sara Danius observes that 'in the mid-nineteenth century, the artist's eye begins to claim sovereignty with unprecedented energy,' as this is 'the period that sees the emergence of mechanical devices for reproducing visual phenomena' (55). In particular, much criticism has been devoted to Whitman's interest in photography. Ruth L. Bohan, for example, suggests that 'if Whitman connected his verse to his person, he also related his poetry to the vivifying potential of visual representations' (5). In addition, Ezra Greenspan and Ed Folsom explore the impact of technological developments on Whitman's various editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Greenspan especially examines how Whitman's early years as a printer's apprentice helped the poet to intertwine his poetry with the advancing technologies of printing, resulting in 'the peculiar literalness with which he saw print and paper' (42). Folsom also relates Whitman's poetry to

the product of a magical science, 'photography,' which Whitman 'catalogues in the service of collecting the real materials out of which a perfected democracy will be constructed' (103). Folsom argues that Whitman does not simply reproduce the actual, but roots of *Leaves of Grass* in reality in order to reveal the significance of each national event, like a professional photographer capturing 'all the actual stuff of the world' and sees it as 'crucial to its wholeness' (104). Indeed, Whitman makes photography his special instrument of seeing, in order to qualify himself as the national 'seer' that Whitman alluded to in his 1855 preface:

The greatest poet hardly knows pettiness or triviality. If he breathes into anything that was before thought small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe. He is a seer.... He is individual ... he is complete in himself.... The others are as good as he, only he sees it and they do not (621).

Whitman seems to define the great American poet as one who, like a camera, is able to reflect and restore whatever comes into his field of vision, whether trivial or important, always alert to reveal the unrecognised significance, transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary. According to Folsom, the key to Whitman's attraction to photography lies in the fact that photographic vision can provide an ability to discover beauty in what has been ignored as ordinary, to capture the fleeting and transform it into an eternal visual impression (102). The connection between poetry and photography, and their overlapping concern with the concept of imagistic representation, makes the study of Whitman's poetic images inseparable from an examination of the development of modern visual technology, specifically photography.

## **2. ON PHOTOGRAPHY AND MODERNITY**

While many reviews of *Leaves of Grass* cite photography as Whitman's innovative poetic aesthetic, Susan Sontag suggests that Whitman is not the first poet to present his poetry as a kind of urban photography. In her study *On Photography*, Sontag points out that 'photography first comes into its own as an extension of the eye of the middle class flâneur, whose sensibility was so accurately charted by Baudelaire' (55). The flâneur, says Sontag, is 'not attracted to the city's official realities but to its dark seamy corners, its neglected populations;' he is 'an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes' (Ibid). In his only book of verse, *The Flowers of Evil (Les Fleurs du mal)*, Baudelaire, a self-proclaimed flâneur, appears as a voyeuristic poet, wandering alone through the metropolis, peering into every corner of the streets, celebrating his encounter with every urban existence, from the prostitute to the corpse, to everything that passes by. Offering a frank and direct treatment of the unpleasant, or what is perceived as ugliness and cruelty, Baudelaire makes his poetic production coincide with the real things of the present, transforming the actual images into convincing spectacles that shimmer with newfound meaning. Yet, Baudelaire was condemned for exposing his poetry to too much unhappy, naked and un-idealised reality, and so *The Flowers of Evil* was banned and accused of immorality when it first appeared in 1857. The ban was not lifted until 1949.

Baudelaire's poetry successfully reveals the photographic accuracy of reportage, and his frank descriptions of urban life suggest a sign of 'realism' which, according to Nancy

Armstrong, can be described as something like a 'composite photograph' (27). Armstrong notes, 'realism and photography' are in essence 'partners in the same cultural project' (26). Baudelaire can be so graphic as to scan every object entering his visual realm with precision, as in his famous poem 'To a Woman Passing By' ('A une passante'), in which he cuts the image of the unknown 'mourning' woman's physical beauty into pieces from her 'statuesque of leg,' the charm of her 'splendid hand,' to her powerful 'glance' in one fleeting moment:

Around me roared the nearly deafening street.  
Tall, slim, in mourning, in majestic grief,  
A woman passed me, with a splendid hand  
Lifting and swinging her festoon and hem;

Nimble and stately, statuesque of leg.  
I, shaking like an addict, from her eye,  
Black sky, spawner of hurricanes, drank in  
Sweetness that fascinates, pleasure that kills.

One lightning flash... then night! Sweet fugitive  
Whose glance has made me suddenly reborn,  
Will we not meet again this side of death?

(1-9)

Baudelaire describes his encounter with an unknown woman passing by who, like 'one lightning flash,' appears with her enchanting 'glance' that makes the poet 'suddenly reborn.' The woman's gesture is like statue-in-motion, as she raises the hem of her skirt with a 'splendid hand,' shows her 'statuesque' leg, and in whose eye the poet drinks '[t]he sweetness that entralls and the pleasure that kills,' in the instant that she moves past and beyond him. However, this woman emerges from the crowd into his realm of vision only to vanish and disappear at that fleeting moment. Baudelaire thus exclaims:

Far from this place! too late! *never* perhaps!  
Neither one knowing where the other goes,  
O you I might have loved, as well you know!

(10-12)

According to Benjamin, the pleasure of the flâneur is 'not so much love at first sight as love at last sight,' and the word '*Never* marks the high point of the encounter, when the poet's passion seems to be frustrated but in reality bursts out of him like a flame' (*Charles Baudelaire* 45). This woman becomes both the figure forever loved and forlorn, the 'figure that fascinates' and also the 'figure of shock' (*Illuminations* 169). Although Benjamin's interpretation focuses on this experience of shock and dramatizes the moment of beauty in the metropolis, this poem reveals Baudelaire's ambivalent feelings towards the fluid world of modernity. Marguerite Murphy suggests that in the modernist search for eternal 'multi-coloured Beauty,' the flâneur finds 'his own failures at creating enduring systems' as well as 'the inevitability of some

surprise or unexpected disruption to the system' (27). Although Baudelaire depicts the flâneur as wandering through the city with an incessant desire to capture the fascinating beauty of the ephemeral, the city walker's attempt to capture the moment and transform it into the eternal is doomed to failure.

For Baudelaire, the attempt to capture or preserve any momentary impact is only possible through the sketch, which is fast and represents the ephemeral in the fluid world of modernity. Baudelaire's concept of modernity is not specifically related to the progress of modern life. Modernity is not merely a process of change, but something partly fleeting and partly eternal. Baudelaire claims:

I know of no better word to express the idea [modernity] I have in mind. He [the flâneur] makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory... Every old master has had his own modernity; the great majority of fine portraits that have come down to us from former generations are clothed in the costume of their own period. They are perfectly harmonious because everything — from costume and coiffure down to gesture, glance and smile (for each age has a deportment, a glance, and a smile of its own) — everything, I say, combines to form a completely viable whole. This transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid, must on no account be despised or dispensed with (*The Painter of Modern Life* 12).

Matei Calinescu suggests that aesthetically speaking, Baudelaire thinks that 'what has survived (aesthetically) from the past is nothing but the expression of a variety of successive modernities, each one of them being unique and, as such, having its unique artistic expression' (49). To put it another way, every age has its own modernity associated with its characteristic concept of fashion, and the flâneur is the artist aiming to seek and experience the rapid changing of fashion in the world of modernity by participating and portraying city life. As Calinescu indicates, Baudelaire's concept of the "eternal half of beauty" (consisting of the most general laws of art) can be brought to a fleeting life (or afterlife) only through the experience of modern beauty' (50).

As the ephemeral aspect of modernity becomes typical of Baudelaire's visual perspective, what does Baudelaire do to transmit every fleeting image or reflect every intense moment that has touched his soul? In *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Crary suggests that, in addition to photography, the kaleidoscope, the toy consisting of a tube with mirrors that reflect pieces of coloured glass to form changing patterns, is also a significant paradigm for visual imagery in the nineteenth century, and Baudelaire uses it as a metaphor that coincides with modernity itself, suggesting 'all the luminous possibilities' of modern urban life (113-116). As Baudelaire comments on 'modernity' in *The Painter of Modern Life*:

Thus the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life (9-10).

The term 'kaleidoscope' deserves special attention. *The Painter of Modern Life* points to the paradoxical aspect of Baudelaire's sense of modernity, showing the clash between the flâneur's nostalgia for the lost values of the pre-modern world and his intoxication with the growth of modern commodity displayed in the streets of the metropolis. Though seduced by the 'flickering grace' of street life, in 'To a Woman Passing By' Baudelaire captures the experience of shock and the chance encounter of the changing city that the poet so ambivalently fears, the fear that brilliant colors will disappear in the urban crowd, giving way in a flash to a monotonous blackness, becoming the image that is forever gone and loved. Now that the kaleidoscope has the function of repeating dazzling colours, Baudelaire wants to distil from it his innovative poetics and use it as a model that reflects the vital substance of modernity, including every fleeting beauty or fleeting luminous image in the perceptible urban life.

Yet, Eliane DalMolin suggests that in fact, Baudelaire would seem 'the worst candidate for a study on the interrelation of poetry and cinema,' since he undeniably 'refutes photography as an art form,' and depicts photography as 'a deterrent for all artistic talents, graphic as well as verbal' (9). What sets Baudelaire against photography is that it violates the very essence of modernity, namely the contingent aspect of modern art. DalMolin puts it: 'the fugitive is by nature not meant to be fixed on a timeless metal plate. Yet photography captures rather than beholds that brief moment of intensity when all elements converge into what German aesthetic philosopher Gotthold Lessing calls the "pregnant moment," or what post-structuralist psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan describes as the moment of *jouissance*' (9). In other words, photography defaces Baudelaire's fugitive aspect of modernity, because in his period, photography was a slow medium requiring stationary poses.

In his famous essay, Baudelaire praises Constantine Guys as the incarnation of the 'painter of modern life.' Being a nineteenth-century draftsman, Guys demonstrates his talent in the speed of sketches and drawings that capture the fleeting aspects of the urban aesthetic perception, or 'the flickering grace of all the elements of life' (*The Painter of Modern Life* 10). Baudelaire develops the theme of 'the spectacle of urban existence,' and these urban images are captured by Guys's 'pen-and-ink sketches and water-colours,' whose 'swift brush-strokes' authentically represent 'the eternal beauty and the amazing harmony of life in the capital cities, a harmony so providentially maintained amid the turmoil of human freedom' (*The Painter of Modern Life* 12). Guys's paintings reflect Baudelaire's appreciation for the contingent aspects of urban experience in the nineteenth-century Paris. As Graeme Gilloch suggests, for Baudelaire, Guys's paintings express 'the momentary and dynamic character of urban forms' (133), as Guys is 'the spectator of contemporary manners and urban scenes' (152).

While Baudelaire exalts Guys as the painter of the modern life, Whitman paints the modern cities of America with what Ed Folsom calls 'chemical properties' (101). Whitman primarily builds his visual poetics on photographic images. His voyeuristic perception of the crowd in *Leaves of Grass* involves modern technological instruments of vision, in which the camera, the scientific magic machine merges with the poet's eye, and transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary, helping to render the images of human life that painters used to aspire to achieve. However, Bann argues that, unlike sketching, nineteenth-century photography was not really suited to capturing life because it was initially a slow medium requiring static poses and long exposures. In his study 'The Inventions of Photography', Bann questions the attempts of photographers: 'in what respect is a photographic print from this period a more accurate record than the original state of the painting?' (118).

Nevertheless, Whitman defiantly demonstrates his ambition in his most well-known poem ‘Song of Myself,’ in which Whitman powerfully articulates the possibility of his omnipresent self dominating the vast landscape of America, with his photographic voyeuristic presence mapping every corner of the country and ultimately witnessing the entire American experience in his time. In other words, Whitman is able to capture everything with his camera eye, because he claims to be omnipresent. Whitman writes:

My ties and ballasts leave me, my elbows rest in sea-gaps,  
I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents,  
I am afoot with my vision.

(714-716)

With his ‘afoot’ mode of ‘vision’ and his ubiquitous visual activity, Whitman is able to emphasize the instantaneous emotions of the crowd, as well as to preserve specific moments of the American experience. He sees, for example, innocence and peace:

The little one sleeps in its cradle,  
I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently brush away flies with  
my hand.

(148-149)

He also looks at chaos and war:

The angry base of disjointed friendship, the faint tones of the sick,  
The judge with hands tight to the desk, his pallid lips pronouncing a  
death-sentence,...

(589-590)

I take part, I see and hear the whole,  
The cries, curses, roar, the plaudits for well-aim’d shots,  
The ambulanza slowly passing trailing its red drip,...

(863-865)

Whitman ‘come[s] and depart[s],’ minding the crowd, ‘or the show or resonance of them’ (166). These images of the crowd represent Whitman’s unique way of observing as he skillfully manipulates the photographic techniques of shifting focus, close-up, magnification, and cropping into his poetry, helping to define in *Leaves of Grass* the birth of a revolutionary poetic art in the history of American poetry. By incorporating photography into his voyeuristic aesthetic, Whitman inscribes the contemporary experience of the American, whether in a situation of tranquillity or rage, further transforming the contingent reality into the permanent. Whitman’s poetry captures Baudelaire’s divided concept of modernity, namely the juxtaposition of the fleeting and the eternal.

### **3. WHITMAN’S CAMERA EYE**

Baudelaire's flâneur is 'the "I" with an insatiable appetite for the "non-I," at every instant rendering and explaining it in pictures more living than life itself, which is always unstable and fugitive' (*The Painter of Modern Life* 10). Similarly, Whitman is fascinated by the multiplicity of human life, and in *Leaves of Grass* he expresses his infatuation with the crowd through a poetic vision imprinted like photography. However, Bohan suggests that although several critics have focused on Whitman's enthusiasm for photography and the interrelationship between his poetry and photographic representation, Whitman's borrowing from the traditional visual arts of painting cannot be overlooked. According to Bohan, the poem 'Pictures,' written around 1855, records 'Whitman's earliest exploration of the poetic potential of the exhibition experience' (26). Whitman writes:

Lo! on a flat road runs a train'd runner, with muscular legs and thighs.—  
He is thinly clothed, —he leans forward as he runs, with closed fists, and arms partially  
    raised.  
Lo! Over the breast of the sea speeds a ship, under full sail—whitish gray, with her  
    black hull underneath, she bends slightly sideways—a pennant is flying  
    aloft—the waves seem to press forward—they topple and frolic with falling  
    foam.  
Lo! the woodcutter cutting down trees in the north-east woods in Wisconsin.  
See you the attitude—see you the muscular limbs and the axe uplifted.

(1-5)

This poem provides a prism through which to see Whitman's verbal play with the traditional representations of painting, from which Whitman derives his early poetic technique of imagistic representation, as Whitman imagines a picture gallery in his mind in which each of his verbal scenes echoes a piece of visual art, making each verbal line resemble a briefly sketched painting. Bohan suggests that a closer examination of 'Pictures' reveals Whitman's early fascination with the great exhibitions of painting, particularly the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851. According to Bohan, Whitman's early poetic representation is closely related to the poet's fascination with the Crystal Palace exhibition, pointing out that as early as the 1920s, Emory Holloway suggested that 'Whitman's "plan" for *Leaves of Grass* was "to make an exhibition,"' and make his poetry 'detail in clear, concise, and graphically compelling language' (28).

Nevertheless, if Whitman really wants his poetry to be as real as traditional paintings on a gallery wall, what drives him to shift the focus of his poetics from the traditional technique of painting to the modern technology of photography or cinema? The answer lies partly in a certain automaticity. As a flâneur who wants to speak for the masses, whose omnipresent self dominates the vast landscape of America, Whitman absorbs and processes the flow of the real, carrying a camera eye, whose perception is heightened in every visual perception of the masses. The poet's voyeuristic eyes seem to operate automatically, attempting to connect each momentary impact into a series of visual spectacles. Sontag suggests that Whitman's manipulation of the mechanical device of photography significantly 'expresses the American impatience with reality, the taste for activities whose instrumentality is a machine' (65). As Sontag puts it:

‘Speed is at the bottom of it all,’ as Hart Crane said (writing about Stieglitz in 1923), ‘the hundredth of a second caught so precisely that the motion is continued from the picture indefinitely: the moment made eternal.’ Faced with the awesome spread and alienness of a newly settled continent, people wielded cameras as a way of taking possession of the places they visited...American photographers are often on the road, overcome with disrespectful wonder at what their country offers in the way of surreal surprises (Ibid).

Fascinated by all the wonders his country can offer, Whitman sets out to record the varied American landscape and capture every free-floating image in the modern world. Although a quintessentially modern poet like Baudelaire, unlike the French poet resisting the use of photography, Whitman internalizes the function of this scientific machine, making the photographic seeing part of his powerful rhetoric of vision, in an effort to fix everything in a state of timelessness and deface the contingent nature of modernity.

In order to achieve his goal, Whitman first launches his radical new poetics by keeping his poetic verbal forms in a fixed present tense, conveying the sensory impressions and immediate emotions of specific moments in a scene; as Jessica Haigney notes, Whitman seeks to make the reader aware of ‘a subjective experience’ (70). In addition, although always on the move like a photographer, Whitman incorporates both the human eye and the camera eye into his perceptual instruments, in order to make his photographic gaze seem more affectionately human. Whitman aims to immerse himself in the crowd, observing the American people with infinite zeal and tenderness, using some cinematic techniques such as cutting or magnifying images and close-ups, so that each new visual object shifts the relations among other images.

For example, in one of his most memorable poems, ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,’ Whitman transforms his experience of crossing the river into a series of cinematic spectacles that express and project the transcendent beauty of the American landscape. Bohan observes that Whitman is like a technologically savvy spectator, ‘absorbed directly into the kinesthetic and kaleidoscopic rhythms of the crossing’ (202). In his poetic lines, Whitman shifts his poetic spotlight from ‘the Twelfth-month sea-gulls’ soaring high ‘oscillating their bodies’ (28), ‘the reflection of the summer sky in the water’ with ‘shimmering track of beams’ (31-32), the falling of flags at sunset, the ‘scallop-edged waves in the twilight’ (44), to the approaching crowd and the ‘chimneys burning high and glaringly into the night’ (47). He connects the diverse and fragmented urban images and fuses them into a coherent work of visual art that transcends time and space. As the magnification of each perception shifts and develops through a process of meditation, contemplating the past and envisioning the future, Whitman writes:

It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,  
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations  
hence,  
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt, Just as any of you is one  
of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,...  
(20-23)

Wynn Thomas suggests that Whitman is so sensitive to the cinematic technique of lighting in ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’ that he symbolically uses ‘light’ to ‘remedy deficiencies in the



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surrounding social landscape;' this poem demonstrates 'Whitman's rhetorical efforts to conceal the distance between his vision of democracy and the imperfect reality' (101). That is, the historical gap between the 1850s and the Civil War years. However, in infusing both bright light and darkness into a single poem, Whitman still embraces faith and insists on revealing himself as a democratic perceiver in the 'crowd.' Folsom suggests that in being part of the crowd, Whitman envisions the image of democracy for the future of his country, since the crowd is 'a blending of individual differences into a heterogeneous unity' (46).

However, as Whitman invents his photographic mode of poetic representation, how does he set out to visualize city life in *Leaves of Grass*? Whitman is obsessed with the idea of capturing the fluid diversity of city life and the mutability of the crowd. However, unlike Baudelaire's flâneur, Whitman is more optimistic about the possibility of capturing the fluidity of city life, and is ambitious to bring together the swirl of passing people and mingle with them in the moment. For example, in the three-line poem 'To You,' Whitman puts it:

Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to speak to me,  
why should you not speak to me?  
And why should I not speak to you?

Apparently, Whitman is not the detached flâneur; he wants to do more than observe and describe people. What gives Whitman the confidence to ask for more interaction with the crowd? The birth of *Leaves of Grass*, in which Whitman sees grass as a symbol of life that unites all races and proclaims democratic unity, depends heavily on the interdependence of the poet and the flow of people. Whitman wants to become a boundary-breaker, exploring not only the conventional boundaries of the self, but also the relationship between the individual and the great population of America.

Although Whitman puts himself at the center of the poem and begins *Song of Myself* with 'I celebrate myself, and sing myself,' he does not really write about himself. Instead, he is the flâneur clothed as a skillful mesmerist who, according to Harold Aspiz, appears as 'a medium or clairvoyant who can penetrate cloth, flesh, or the solid earth; make contact with the innermost consciousness of men and women; heal the sick; behind the future and the past; interact with the powers that animate the universe; and, with impassioned lyricism, reveal what he has experienced' (162). Because of the magical mesmeric energy that links and accelerates his fusing with the crowd, Whitman is able to develop his composite self:

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,  
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,  
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,  
Stuff'd with the stuff that is coarse and stuff'd with the stuff that is fine,...  
Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion,  
A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,  
Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.

(330-349)

Above all, Whitman, the flâneur and the mesmerist, has a particular poetic vision that captures the fleeting and shocking experience of modern urban life. He not only frames the city

as poetry, but also unveils it as a site of spectacle, often composing each object that enters his field of vision into an incessant flow of individual spectacles, modelling a seemingly cinematic mode of visual perception in poetry. In other words, he likes to address a cluster of physical objects and optical perception gathering around the instant and subsequent image of technology, as it is in the chaotic scene of ‘whizz of limbs, heads, stone, wood, iron, high in the air’ (868) in battles, or the rapid ‘ring of alarm—bells, the cry of fire, the whirr of swift-streaking engines and hose-carts with premonitory tinkles and color’d lights’ (592) on the streets.

In addition to his dominant status as an omnipresent observer, or his ability to capture every urban spectacle, the series of tableaux in *Leaves of Grass*, particularly the Alamo and the navel battle scene, are presented like a magic lantern show. Crary points out that the magic lantern, which ‘developed alongside the camera obscura had the capacity to appropriate the setup of the latter and subvert its operation by infusing its interior with reflected and projected images using artificial light’ (33). Through this optical technology, Whitman attempts to articulate his visual perception of the Alamo, recalling the bloody scene of the past, through the shifting light reflected from the murderers, the shooting, the blood, the dead, to the clock which struck. Whitman writes in section 34 of ‘Song of Myself’:

Now I tell what I knew in Texas in my early youth,...  
Some made a mad and helpless rush, some stood stark and straight,  
A few fell at once, shot in the temple or heart,...  
The maim’d and mangled dug in the dirt, the new-comers saw them there,  
Some half-kill’d attempted to crawl away,...  
A youth not seventeen years old seiz’d his assassin till two more came to release him,  
The three were all torn and cover’d with the boy’s blood.  
At eleven o’clock began the burning of the bodies;  
That is the tale of the murder of the four hundred and twelve young men.

(871-896)

Danius comments that ‘moments of spontaneous retrospection are impossible to grasp one by one,’ for memory images are always in flux, ‘as evanescent as they are indivisible’ (96). More than a poet who copies and fixes the images of crowds, as what Proust does in *Remembrance*, Whitman aims to capture ‘the essentially mobile nature of memory’ (Ibid). Whitman demonstrates his rhetorical effort through a seemingly running filmstrip, illustrating the dynamic memory of the American scene from 1855 to 1891.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

As the sense of timeless presence that emanates from each poem has informed Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, the poet makes himself a photographer, expressing every imaginative representation of the American scene and linking each visual object into a series of photographic forms that, in turn, become a chain of cinematic episodes that tell the great story of America. Whitman’s rhetoric of vision not only anticipates the cinematic modes of perception, but also opens a window onto the poet’s poetic aesthetics. Whitman’s poetic vision unfolds a particular modernist mode of visual experience, representing the dynamic nature of techno-scientific perception with its consistent use of multiple images rather than

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philosophical, meditative concepts. *Leaves of Grass* captures the reader's attention because its poetic representation not only demonstrates Whitman's long-standing commitment to the mutually constructed forms of verbal and visual representation, but also offers a glimpse into the connection between poetry and photography. Now that both poetry and photography are image producers, Whitman's poetry represents an attempt to understand how the two meet and construct a powerful new poetics despite their historical gap in development.

In conclusion, Whitman's innovative verbal forms and his technologies of perception intersect, and both seem to accentuate Whitman's radical experiment with his poetic modes, in which the fusion of photography and poetry can be achieved through the role of the flâneur. Through the flâneur's camera eye, mixed with his special techniques of observation, Whitman's reader is drawn to the poet's astonishing combination of verbal and visual modes, which, though intensely lyrical, evokes the strength of poetic graphic power. Through his interplay of verbal forms and visual technologies in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman places poetry in the context of scientific invention. Unveiling a unique rhetoric of vision, *Leaves of Grass* provides an important framework for assessing America's varied urban landscape as well as the diversity of nineteenth-century American visual culture.

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