Introduction

Seeing Perception in the Institutes

> There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"
>
> —David Foster Wallace

> In the Middle Ages . . . a lascivious gaze was said to be equivalent to sin, and a look could literally be venomous: these were no mere figures of speech . . .. Where modern science ascribes such phenomena to the subjective operations of the human psyche, medieval theories of vision offered compelling physiological explanations for many of these optical effects.
>
> —Suzannah Biernoff

With a flourish, the performer places a bright white card behind the disk. The stunned audience now sees that the disk – which until this moment had appeared white – is in fact solid black. This popular twentieth-century stage illusion is known as the Gelb effect. In the setup, a performer uses illumination to cause their audience to see black as white. Then, the performer deploys contrast to facilitate a sudden visual correction, enabling the audience to register that what had appeared white was black all along. The recalibration occurs instantly: viewers literally see – before they understand – that their initial perception was not just slightly off but dead wrong.[1]

Epigraphs: David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (Little, Brown and Company, 2009), 3–4. Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 5.

[1] Adhémar Gelb, "Die 'Farbenkonstanz' der Sehdinge," in *Handbuch der normalen und pathologischen Physiologie*, ed. A. Bethe et al. (Julius Springer, 1929), 594–678.

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The spectacle I've just described leverages the oldest known illusion in the study of lightness perception: discussed by the ancient Greeks, studied by Ibn al-Haythem (Alhazen) in the Middle Ages, and today known to scholars as simultaneous lightness contrast.[2] Fifteenth-century artist and art theorist Leon Battista Alberti remarks upon the effect in his treatise *De pictura*, which is often hailed as one of the groundbreaking texts of the early Renaissance: "Ivory and silver are white, but if compared to a swan or to snow-white linen cloths, they appear somewhat pallid."[3] With this observation, Alberti offers us a glimpse into early modern optics, where the variable appearance of shades under different lighting conditions was a generative topic.[4] To Renaissance Europeans, these optical phenomena were not merely aesthetic curiosities. They served as epistemological object lessons about the construction and limits of human perception. As Alberti observes in his discussion of contrast as a route to understanding, what is dark and obscure is only "found out by comparison."[5]

The first extended illustration in John Calvin's 1559 *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (*Institutio Christianae Religionis*) evokes this very phenomenon to describe how sin enacts a predictable distortion on human self-perception. Because humans' sense (*sensus*)[6] of their own worthiness is calibrated according to corrupted standards, "what is a little less vile pleases us as a thing most pure." The result is that "we seem to ourselves (*nobis videmur*)" righteous by comparison. Calvin dramatizes this effect by invoking the visual implications of simultaneous contrast: "Just so," Calvin observes, "an eye to which nothing is shown but black objects judges something dirty white or even rather darkly mottled to be whiteness itself."[7]

[2] Elias Economou, Suncica Zdravkovic, and Alan Gilchrist, "Anchoring versus Spatial Filtering Accounts of Simultaneous Lightness Contrast," *Journal of Vision* 7, no. 12 (2007): 1. One explanatory model for this phenomenon is perceptual anchoring. See Richard F. Murray, "Lightness Perception in Complex Scenes," *Annual Review of Vision Science* 7 (2021): 420–21.

[3] Alberti, *De pictura* bk. 1, para. 18, in On Painting: *A New Translation and Critical Edition*, ed. and trans. Rocco Sinisgalli (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 38.

[4] Moshe Barasch, *Light and Color in the Italian Renaissance Theory of Art* (New York University Press, 1978), 17–24.

[5] Alberti, *De pictura* bk. 1, para. 18, in On Painting, 38. For similar comments regarding gold paint, see Alberti, *De pictura* bk. 2, para. 49, in On Painting, 72–73. For a parallel remark by Leonardo da Vinci, see J. P. Richter, *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci* (Oxford University Press, 1939), 280.

[6] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1.1.1. Latin from *Joannis Calvini Opera Selecta* [*OS*], ed. Petrus Barth and Guilelmus Niesel (Wipf & Stock, 2011), 3.31.12.

[7] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.2, *OS* 3.32.14 and 3.32.24–27, respectively.

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This line is more than a passing comment on the extent of human sinfulness. Interpreted against its original optical backdrop, the *Institutes*' inaugural image identifies a distinct, though related problem. The effect of sin upon perception is to prevent humans from even seeing the difference between the darkness of their own condition and the blinding white of divine majesty.

In the Gelb illusion, the audience's perception is recalibrated when the performer places a white card behind the dark disk. So too for Calvin, accurate *sensus* can only be restored through contrast provided by the necessary "straightedge (*amussim*)." The term Calvin uses to describe this requirement is telling: *ad amussim* literally means "according to a rule or level" and is another way of saying "accurately."[8] According to Calvin, the missing straightedge is God's genuine splendor – the brilliant whiteness that, when juxtaposed to human sinfulness, reveals humanity's true, "rather darkly mottled" condition.[9]

The crucial point – in both Calvin's object lesson and the phenomenon's later popularization in the Gelb illusion – is that while the shift from one perceptual anchor to another constitutes a change in the subjective conditions of the viewer, it is nevertheless experienced as a change in the stimulus. In the stage version, the audience does not *interpret* the disk as white and then black. They *see* the disk as white and then black. The visual impression of each color cannot be avoided – as Gelb himself wrote, it is "absolutely compulsory."[10] Similarly, Calvin's description evokes the instantaneous and involuntary nature of perceptual recalibration, the way imposing contrast makes the world rearrange itself, right before the viewer's eyes: "When [God] shall bring forth his splendor and

[8] *A Latin Dictionary*, founded on Andrews' edition of Freund's Latin Dictionary, revised, enlarged, and in great part rewritten by Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879). Perseus Digital Library, "amussis," accessed February 15, 2025.

[9] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.2–3. *OS* 3.33.6. Calvin mentions three key attributes in *Institutes*, 1.1.3: glory, majesty, and purity. For a rich reading of Calvin on divine majesty, see Rebekah Earnshaw, "The Usefulness of Divine Majesty According to Calvin on Genesis," *Calvin Theological Journal* 51, no. 2 (2016): 181–203.

[10] Gelb continues: "It does not matter how one thinks about the illumination; it is impossible to see 'an intensely illuminated black' instead of 'white'. . .. *Now* we bring a small bit of really white paper into the light .... *Instantly* the disc is 'black' ... one has the experience that at the place where one *had* been seeing a faintly lighted white there has *now* appeared a brilliantly illuminated black." Gelb, "Colour Constancy," in *A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology*, ed. and trans. Willis D. Ellis (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1938), 207. Emphases in the original.

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cause it to draw nearer," Calvin promises, "the brightest thing will become darkness before it."[11]

I linger over this passage to highlight that the stakes of Calvin's illustration are not only moral; they are also, and perhaps more crucially, perceptual. The point is not merely that sin has pernicious perceptual effects. It is not even that sinful self-perception can be recalibrated when – as a modern student of perception might say – it is "anchored" by the appropriate contextual cue. Most urgently, the illustration underlines that what humans take for self-evidently accurate perception is, in fact, a condition of drastic and constitutive *mis*perception.

With this diptych – an optical illusion and its rectification through visual contrast – the *Institutes*' opening paragraphs pose a pressing question. Calvin asks not just, do we see things as they are? but also, would we know if we didn't? How can we be sure that our confident perceptions are not illusions, perpetrated by the absence of the appropriate straightedge?

VISUAL PERCEPTION IN THE *INSTITUTES*

This dramatization of the malleability of human perception is far from an outlier in the *Institutes*. Through a drumbeat of complaints about humans' dull obliviousness to God's unmissable self-manifestations, the *Institutes*' early chapters cast "the problem" of fallen life in overwhelmingly perceptual terms, as a matter of distorted and ultimately deluded visual perception unto functional blindness. But vision is not only cast negatively: it is equally part of "the solution" the text invokes. Positively, the *Institutes* describes how the effects of sin can be mitigated through mirrors in which God becomes visible to even fallen perception. Indeed, one of the work's most memorable images, the spectacles of scripture, is strikingly visual. So too are Calvin's descriptions of the many phenomena sin keeps humans from seeing – perhaps most famously, the dazzling theater of creation. From the marks, sparks, and other shining tokens whereby Calvin's God self-manifests, to the bleary-eyed, even hallucinating humans who fail to be true spectators, the *Institutes* continually returns to the conditions that make for accurate visual perception or its opposite.[12]

[11] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.3. *OS* 3.33.36–38. This image points to a method for accurately discerning the true character of the human condition – namely, contrast through juxtaposition. I return to this in Chapter 5.

[12] See, for example, Calvin, *Institutes,* 1.5.1, 1.5.8, 1.6.1–2, 1.14.21, 2.7.7, 4.8.5, and 4.14.6.

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Calvin and Perception begins from this observation – namely, that the reformer's most-studied work is shot through with references to mal- and re-formed visual perception, its causes, and potential correctives. But it is not only the visual sense that Calvin's prose indicts – far from it. The other senses are not exempt from the perceptual effects of the fall: while Calvin calls humans "blind," he also calls them "deaf to all the voices of God that resound in the air,"[13] unable to "taste" God's fatherly care.[14] Calvin's willingness to mingle sensory modalities in describing both fallen perception and corrective measures raises an important aspect of the text's cultural milieu. What we think of as well-defined, individual modes of sensation were, in the sixteenth century, moments in a single sensorium.[15] Against this backdrop, it's reasonable to interpret Calvin's charges of "blindness" and "deafness" as overlapping perceptual failures.

This study's focus on visual perception, then, is not intended to exclude the other senses from the effects of sin and the need for rehabilitation. It is, however, a way of taking seriously that the number and force of the *Institutes*' other sensory references pale in comparison to its striking and consistent visual motifs.[16] The text's preponderance of visual vocabulary may reflect the view that God's original self-manifestation to unfallen humans was powerfully though not exclusively visual.[17] It likely also reflects a sensory culture in which, traditionally, vision was the most

[13] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.6.4. *OS* 3.64.25–26. The reference is to Psalm 29:7–9.

[14] For representative examples of this less prominent but striking gustatory motif, see Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.1, 2.6.4, 3.2.34, and 3.9.3. For this terminology in Latin, see, e.g., *OS* 3.188.30. There is also some imagery in the *Institutes* related to touch. See, for example, 1.13.13, 1.14.22, 2.12.1, and 4.17.3. On this minority report, see Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Senses of Touch: Human Dignity and Deformity from Michelangelo to Calvin* (Brill, 1998), 172–256. There is some notable olfactory language at *Institutes* 3.10.2.

[15] François Quiviger, *The Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art* (Reaktion Books, 2010), 17. Partly in acknowledgment of this historical nuance, contemporary research on vision is beginning to assume, as Sally M. Promey puts it, "the multisensory aspects and capacities of visuality itself." Promey, "Religion, Sensation, and Materiality: An Introduction," in *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice*, ed. Sally M. Promey (Yale University Press, 2014), 11. Similarly, scholars are approaching sensation as a "complex assemblage": see Patrizia Di Bello and Gabriel Koureas, "Introduction – Other than the Visual: Art, History and the Senses," in *Art, History and the Senses: 1830 to the Present*, ed. Patrizia Di Bello and Gabriel Koureas (Routledge, 2010), 4.

[16] On the primacy of sight in Calvin, see Boyle, *Senses of Touch*, 219–20.

[17] This is a possible reading of the *Institutes*' opening emphasis on fallen sinfulness as blindness in relation to the emphatically though not exclusively visual spectacle that is creation.

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powerful of the senses, the sense most closely associated with knowledge, and thus the most dangerous sense if and when subverted.[18] Indeed, it may be that the especially contested status of visual epistemology in sixteenth-century Europe offered Calvin a culturally salient and intuitively plausible way to diagnose and depict the perceptual effects of sin.

Calvin's approval and use of visual experience has been increasingly remarked by scholars. From Randall C. Zachman on manifestation,[19] to Susan E. Schreiner and Serene Jones on the beauties of creation,[20] scholarship of the last two decades has decisively set aside the old caricature of Calvin as the enemy of all things visual. More pointedly, several pathbreaking articles by Lee Palmer Wandel have situated Calvin at the cusp of evolving late medieval and early modern visual cultures and, in this connection, drawn attention to the reformer's trenchant insistence on God's visibility.[21] Most recently, Sujin Pak has drawn attention to Calvin's emphasis on the visual features of Old Testament prophetic language to suggest that the reformer could be read as advocating a "visual theology."[22] So, too, a dissertation by one of Pak's students, Franklin Tanner Capps, has suggested that what Calvin offers is in fact a "theology of vision."[23]

Despite these indications that vision may offer a fertile route into Calvin's thought, the *Institutes* has never yet been systematically treated

[18] Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 10–14.

[19] Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

[20] Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Baker Academic, 1995), 28, 65, 120–22; and Jones, "Glorious Creation, Beautiful Law," in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 19–39. See also Randall C. Zachman, "The Universe as the Living Image of God: Calvin's Doctrine of Creation Reconsidered," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (1997): 299–312.

[21] Wandel, "John Calvin and Michel de Montaigne on the Eye," in *Early Modern Eyes*, ed. Walter S. Melion and Lee Palmer Wandel (Brill, 2010), 135–55; and Wandel, "Incarnation, Image, and Sign: John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* & Late Medieval Visual Culture," in *Image and Incarnation: The Early Modern Doctrine of the Pictorial Image*, ed. Walter S. Melion and Lee Palmer Wandel (Brill, 2015), 187–202.

[22] Pak, "Calvin's Visual Exegesis of Old Testament Prophecy: Figural Reading and the Sacramental Character of Scripture," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 25, no. 2 (2023): 207.

[23] Capps, "Beholding the Image: Vision in John Calvin's Theology" (ThD diss., Duke University, 2018). For a detailed discussion of how the present project differs from and provides a historical grounding for these accounts, see my discussion on the contributions of this monograph below.

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as a text concerned with visual perception. Neither have its visual references been contextualized within the nuanced debates regarding the processes and pitfalls of perception in sixteenth-century Europe. Nor, finally, have its extensive positive visual motifs been reconciled to its equally salient concerns about idolatry.

What accounts for this gap in scholarship? It may betray the persistence of the old truism that Calvin and his fellow reformers rejected the use of the eyes in religion. Indeed, beyond the circle of dedicated Calvin scholars, the starkly anti-sensory portrait sketched in Carlos M. N. Eire's widely cited *War Against the Idols* (1986) seems to have relegated the reformers' concerns to a narrowly conceived "spiritual" realm.[24] The result has been largely to exempt their writings from early modern historians' increasingly "material" interests and investigations. Whatever its cause, the result is that, as Anna Kvíčalová observed in 2019, "The fact that even the most radical branches of Protestantism, such as Calvinism, took shape around their own sensory programs has still not been widely recognized."[25]

Luckily, several developments make this an auspicious moment to reconsider Calvin's relationship to the senses. First, returning the *Institutes* to its original, Europe-wide environment of visual assumptions and concerns – as I do in Chapter 1 – is newly possible thanks to a growing interest in the sensory cultures of early modern Europe.[26] This interest has birthed a host of recent anthologies, including *Early Modern Eyes* (Brill, 2010), *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe* (Brill, 2013), *Sensing the Sacred in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Routledge, 2018), and *Embodiment, Expertise, and Ethics in Early Modern Europe: Entangling the Senses* (Routledge, 2021).[27] The conversation is producing both a growing archive and a framework that

[24] Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[25] Kvíčalová, *Listening and Knowledge in Reformation Europe: Hearing, Speaking and Remembering in Calvin's Geneva* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 6.

[26] For an overview of these developments, see Marlene L. Eberhart and Jacob M. Baum, "Introduction – Entangled Senses: Putting Knowledge into Practice in Early Modern Europe," in *Embodiment, Expertise, and Ethics in Early Modern Europe: Entangling the Senses*, ed. Marlene L. Eberhart and Jacob M. Baum (Routledge, 2021), 4–7.

[27] Melion and Wandel, *Early Modern Eyes*; Wietse de Boer and Christine Göttler, eds., *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe* (Brill, 2013); Robin Macdonald, Emilie K. M. Murphy, and Elizabeth L. Swann, eds., *Sensing the Sacred in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Routledge, 2018); and Eberhart and Baum, *Embodiment, Expertise, and Ethics*.

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allow a fresh approach to an otherwise well-studied text like Calvin's *Institutes*.[28]

Second, the tide is turning in Reformation studies. Although the old dichotomy between sensory Catholics and spiritual Protestants has proven difficult to dislodge, new research is retelling the story of the Reformation as a radical transformation of the role of the senses in worship. To foreground the role of the senses in Protestant practice is to reinvigorate a line of research that goes back to Bob Scribner's seminal work on late medieval and early modern visual pieties.[29] As Scribner emphasized, Protestantism attempted a radical change – but *not* a destruction – of modes of perceiving the sacred, of the "ways of seeing" practiced by lay Christians and encouraged by clergy in the Middle Ages.[30] Scribner's work laid critical groundwork for a new wave of scholarship that is today reexamining the legacy of the Reformation as a contestation over and transformation in sensory cultures.[31]

[28] See, among others, David Hillman and Carla Mazzio, eds., *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* (Routledge, 1997); Robert S. Nelson, ed., *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); Elizabeth D. Harvey, ed., *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (University of Chicago Press, 2004); Quiviger, *Italian Renaissance Art*; Charis Charalampous, *Rethinking the Mind-Body Relationship in Early Modern Literature, Philosophy and Medicine: The Renaissance of the Body* (Routledge, 2016); Emanuel Stelzer, "Early Modern Visualities," in *Portraits in Early Modern English Drama: Visual Culture, Play-Texts, and Performances* (Routledge, 2019), 28–44; and Elizabeth L. Swann, *Taste and Knowledge in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[29] R. W. [Bob] Scribner, "Perceptions of the Sacred in Germany at the End of the Middle Ages," in *Religion and Culture in Germany (1400–1800)*, ed. Lyndal Roper (Brill, 2001), 85–103. See also Scribner, "Popular Piety and Modes of Visual Perception in Late-Medieval and Reformation Germany," *The Journal of Religious History* 15, no. 4 (1989): 448–69; and Scribner, "Ways of Seeing in the Age of Dürer," in *Dürer and His Culture*, ed. Dagmar Eichberger and Charles Zika (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 93–117.

[30] Scribner, "Perceptions of the Sacred," 102–3.

[31] Scribner, "Popular Piety," 449. Recent titles that take up this line of argument include Matthew Milner, *The Senses and the English Reformation* (Ashgate, 2011); Jacob M. Baum, *Reformation of the Senses: The Paradox of Religious Belief and Practice in Germany* (University of Illinois Press, 2019); Kvíčalová, *Listening and Knowledge*; and Barbara Pitkin, ed., *Semper Reformanda: John Calvin, Worship, and Reformed Traditions* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018). For general introductions to this turn in scholarship, see Lee Palmer Wandel, *The Reformation: Towards a New History* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), especially 10–13, 23–38, and 201–64; and Wietse de Boer and Christine Göttler, "Introduction: The Sacred and the Senses in an Age of Reform," in de Boer and Göttler, *Religion and the Senses*, 1–13.

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Finally, a growing body of research is also taking up Scribner's generative observation that visual pieties continued to inform Protestant practices, including those related to the Word.[32] These studies have given rise to the realization that Protestantism is not exclusively or flatly non-visual, but rather has its own aesthetics and even a distinctive visual culture.[33] To date, much of this scholarship has focused on Lutheran artwork. Unfortunately, this accent tends to reinforce the ideas, first, that the production of worship or para-worship images is the most significant contribution to or indicator of visual culture, and second and therefore, that Calvinism has no visual culture.[34] As a result, this work gives the impression – if inadvertently – that the Genevan reformer has no role in a narrative about European visual culture, except as a villain or detractor. The exception to this trend proves the rule: William A. Dyrness' 2004 *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture* and his 2019 *The Origins of Protestant Aesthetics in Early Modern Europe* both take up the vexed question of Calvinist attitudes toward vision. However, by focusing exclusively on interior mental imagery, these studies reinforce the assumption that Reformed theology is relevant only to spiritual or metaphorical, and not physical or literal, practices of vision.[35] Thus, even amidst these

[32] Scribner, "Popular Piety," 463.

[33] See, for example, Promey, "Religion, Sensation, and Materiality," 14; Bridget Heal, "Introduction: Art and Religious Reform in Early Modern Europe," *Art History* 40, no. 2 (2017): 246–55; Bridget Heal, "The Catholic Eye and the Protestant Ear: The Reformation as a Non-Visual Event?," in *The Myth of the Reformation*, ed. Peter Opitz (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 321–55; Bridget Heal, "Visual and Material Culture," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Protestant Reformations*, ed. Ulinka Rublack (Oxford University Press, 2017), 601–20; and William A. Dyrness, *The Origins of Protestant Aesthetics in Early Modern Europe: Calvin's Reformation Poetics* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). For a thoughtful discussion of the effects of Calvinism on the development of Dutch art, see Angela Vanhaelen, "Calvinism and Visual Culture: The Art of Evasion," in *Cultures of Calvinism in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Crawford Gribben and Graeme Murdock (Oxford University Press, 2019), 138–53.

[34] This is the case with the work of Bridget Heal, cited above. David Morgan's important work theorizing religion as visual culture also focuses largely on images. See Morgan, "The Look of the Sacred," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 296–318. Vanhaelen has offered interesting musings on the role that Svetlana Alpers' landmark 1983 art history monograph, *The Art of Describing*, may have played in reinforcing this narrative in the Dutch context. "Calvinism and Visual Culture," 145–46.

[35] Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 33–35, 305, 312, and especially 68–69; and Dyrness, *Protestant Aesthetics*, 5–6, 68–70, and 86. Note that although Dyrness frames his 2004 study around "imagination," he uses this term to indicate a

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promising developments in early modern history, Calvin remains conspicuously absent from discussions of Renaissance visual culture.

One reason scholarship has been slow to situate the reformer in Europe's "reformation of the senses"[36] may lie in Calvin's ambivalence toward vision: even as he fulminates against visual idolatry, the theologian also makes liberal use of visual imagery and praises the visual dimensions of creation and the sacraments. As *Calvin and Perception* will show, this apparent contradiction resolves into a new and striking pattern when we return Calvin's landmark work to a hitherto unexamined aspect of its historical context – namely, early modern Europeans' preoccupation with the need to secure the reliability of visual perception against threats both internal and external. The presence of this animating tension throughout the *Institutes* indicates the central place of perception in the work's account of human flourishing, not the opposite. In surfacing both the positive uses and the negative perversions of visual perception as they are depicted in the *Institutes*, the present study offers an integrated account of what the *Institutes* teaches about perception – what, especially, visual perception was intended to be good for and how it can be good again.

VISUAL CULTURE AS A HISTORICAL "STRAIGHTEDGE"

The objective of *Calvin and Perception* is to return the *Institutes* to its original visual culture and to surface what nuances emerge when we do. But what is "visual culture," and how can it illumine a book without a single illustration – excepting its printer's mark? I use this term to indicate the culturally constructed dimensions of visual experience, as distinct from the biological dimensions of vision. This distinction between culturally mediated "visuality" and vision itself runs parallel to the well-established distinction between "sexuality" and sex.[37]

Weltbild or mentalité, not the widely recognized nexus of pre-conscious processing that sixteenth-century Europeans understood as a physiological faculty connecting body and mind, as I will do throughout this study. Dyrness, *Reformed Theology*, 6. Capps' 2018 study similarly elevates the theme of vision in Calvin's writings only to subordinate exterior to interior seeing. Capps concludes that physical vision is a "relatively diminished mode of visual comprehension in comparison to beholding," which he defines as "insight or comprehension" leading to "understanding" – though note that he uses these terms without locating them in relation to the early modern mental model I leverage across this study. See *Beholding the Image*, v and 13, respectively.

[36] Baum, *Reformation of the Senses*, 1.

[37] Robert S. Nelson, "Introduction: Descartes's Cow and Other Domestications of the Visual," in Nelson, *Visuality*, 2. See also Hal Foster: "The difference between [vision

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At its best, the study of visual culture is based on the premise that the act of seeing is socialized and therefore must be historicized.[38] Whereas attention to visual culture is well-established in fields such as art history and media studies,[39] its arrival in religious studies is somewhat more recent. It has gained momentum as part of the broader material turn and turn to the body, bolstered by object studies and the anthropology of the senses,[40] both of which have brought increased attention to objects and modes of religious sensing.[41]

and visuality] signals a difference within the visual – between the mechanism of sight and its historical techniques, between the datum of vision and its discursive determinations – a difference, many differences, among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein." Foster, "Preface," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Bay Press, 1988), ix.

[38] "For human beings collectively to orchestrate their visual experience together it is required that each submit his or her retinal experience to the socially agreed description(s) of an intelligible world. Vision is socialized, and thereafter deviation from this social construction of visual reality can be measured and named, variously, as hallucination, misrecognition, or 'visual disturbance.'" Norman Bryson, "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," in Foster, *Vision and Visuality*, 91. On the need to study historically specific visualities, see Martin Jay, "Vision in Context: Reflections and Refractions," in *Vision in Context: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight*, ed. Teresa Brennan and Martin Jay (Routledge, 1996), 3–4; and Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (University of California Press, 1993), 9–10.

[39] Many of the seminal works appeared between the 1970s and the 1990s. Two I find especially useful are Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Clarendon Press, 1972); and Svetlana Alpers' *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 1983). Relevant works composed from a media and cultural studies orientation include Foster, *Vision and Visuality*; Brennan and Jay, *Vision in Context*; and Jay, *Downcast Eyes*.

[40] See, for example, David Howes, ed., *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses* (University of Toronto Press, 1991); Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures* (Routledge, 1993); and David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (University of Michigan Press, 2003). For an overview of this movement in anthropology and a detailed bibliography, see Yael Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible* (T&T Clark, 2012), 11–17. For a discussion of how these movements have influenced scholarship on early modern Europe, see Eberhart and Baum, "Entangled Senses," 1–16.

[41] See, among others, Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Harvard University Press, 2000); Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (University of California Press, 2006); Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrips, "Aesthetics," in *Key Words in Religion, Media and Culture*, ed. David Morgan (Routledge, 2008), 20–30; Birgit Meyer, ed., *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture*; David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual*

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The most capacious approach to the study of visual culture, which I embrace here, is also based on a further premise – namely, that it is not only formally designated objects of vision, such as art, that shape visual culture. It's also less rarified features of visual environments, and especially *discourses* about what vision is and *practices* that encourage or discourage certain ways of seeing, that shape what it means to "see" in a given time and place – in other words, that give rise to culturally and historically specific "visual cultures."[42]

From this perspective, it is unfortunate that research connecting religion and visuality has continued to focus almost exclusively on devotional images and décor. Seeking the history of vision only in visible images creates a blind spot because, as Suzannah Biernoff has remarked, it is *also* the case that "the imaging and imagining of vision occurs in texts."[43] To date, however, the growing literature exploring historically specific visual cultures has not been widely leveraged for the interpretation of non-pictorial religious texts. As the first monograph to offer a sustained interpretation of a single, image-less theological work from the perspective of visual culture, *Calvin and Perception* begins to redress the relative absence of dedicated theological analysis in studies of visual culture, whether in early modernity or beyond.[44]

In so doing, I hope to show that sixteenth-century visual culture is not an alien framework imposed from without but a silent backdrop that the *Institutes* – in its explicit perceptual motifs and concerns – everywhere assumes and invites its readers to use in its interpretation.[45] The founding

Culture and the Social Life of Feeling (University of California Press, 2012); Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, eds., *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); Promey, *Sensational Religion*; and Christopher Ocker and Susanna Elm, eds., *Material Christianity: Western Religion and the Agency of Things* (Springer, 2020).

[42] Biernoff articulates several of these premises with admirable succinctness: "Visuality extends beyond the ordinary notion of vision as a physical (if psychologically 'mediated') phenomenon . . . visuality is implicated in social formations and ideologies . . . looking is a cultural practice as well as a physiological process . . . vision is always mediated by discourses about vision." Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 4.

[43] Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment,* 4.

[44] Important articles by Wandel – for example, Wandel, "John Calvin" and Wandel, "Incarnation, Image, and Sign" – as well as Biernoff's *Sight and Embodiment* constitute notable exceptions to this rule. Indeed, Biernoff's *Sight and Embodiment* is the only monograph-length interpretation of theological texts from the perspective of visual culture of which I am aware.

[45] For a project similarly based on the premise that early modern uses of language reflect historically situated (in this case, seventeenth-century) assumptions about how vision

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intuition that guides this reading is that perceptual stakes fund, and therefore can illumine, the *Institutes*' literary strategies, from its theological content to its distinctive stylistics.[46] In short, if Calvin's claim at the beginning of the *Institutes* is that the human condition becomes visible only when viewed against the "straightedge" of divine majesty, then the methodological wager of this study is that the perceptual stakes of this landmark text[47] become visible only when viewed against the straightedge of early modern visual epistemology – and especially its widely recognized points of vulnerability.

THE "WATER" OF PRE-CARTESIAN VISUAL CULTURE

Appreciating the premises about visual perception widely shared by sixteenth-century European readers and writers requires constellating mutually reinforcing developments in early modern optics, epistemology, art, religion, literature, and psychology. Drawing together these threads is the primary work of Chapter 1, so I will resist full treatment here. For now, let me quickly sketch key features of the sixteenth-century backdrop against which, I am suggesting, we can see the *Institutes* with new eyes. This too-brief discussion will give me an opportunity to clarify my use of "perception," a term that I have employed casually to this point, but whose precise definition will prove critical in the analyses to follow.

Everything to come in this section – and indeed, in this book – hinges upon an observation that may seem obvious, but whose interpretive implications seem to slip our minds at just the moment we encounter a reference to spectacles or spectatorship, to people blinder than moles or blind idolators. This is the point that the *pre*-Cartesian model of visual perception proper to the *Institutes* – that is, the model that held sway from the time of Aristotle until the seventeenth-century innovations of

works, see Erin Webster, *The Curious Eye: Optics and Imaginative Literature in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford University Press, 2020), especially 30–31.

[46] If this is the case, then this work of early modern writing can be interpreted as both a mirror and a motor of its early modern optical milieu – that is to say, as a work that can both be illumined by, and in turn, illumine, its original visual culture. This approach reflects a methodological premise I take from Gabrielle M. Spiegel, namely, that "texts both mirror and generate social realities." Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 24.

[47] "No other major religious book of the Reformation apart from Melanchthon's *Loci* was so heavily revised, went through so many editions, and reached so many people." Bruce Gordon, *John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion: A Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 20.

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Kepler and Descartes – differs in important ways from the assumptions that we may unconsciously bring to our reading of early modern texts. This pitfall exists because assumptions related to vision, which form the bedrock of any visual culture, often remain unstated. They are, as in David Foster Wallace's quip about confused young fish, the water – essential enabling conditions that tend to go unnoticed because they are both ever-present and indispensable. For this reason, it's easy to lose one's grip on properly sixteenth-century premises and smuggle in our own modern or postmodern assumptions, using them as the implicit backdrop for our reading.

To deliberately oversimplify the distinction, a post-Cartesian model of visual perception consists of two steps: sensation (the collection of sense data) followed by conscious, rational interpretation. By contrast, a pre-Cartesian model consists of three. First, individual sense impressions in the form of *species*[48] are taken into the eye as material imprints. Second, these physical impressions are combined into other, composite impressions (also physical) that contain subtle emotional coloring and even potential distortions introduced unconsciously by the passions and a host of related operations.[49] This unconscious and instantaneously performed processing work is collectively attributed to a faculty or function known as the "imagination," and the composite percepts it produces, typically called phantasms, constitute visual experience. Only following this, in a third and distinct phase, can rational operations like thinking and making conscious decisions occur. And these operations, typically attributed to powers like reason and intellect, are performed only with and upon the phantasms produced in the second step, by the imagination. I will have cause to repeat this explanation *ad nauseum* in the chapters to follow, but for now, the point is this: in the model proper to the *Institutes*, we see (not "see" quote/unquote)[50] as a combined result of steps 1 and 2, and only in step 3 do we think. And we think, not about the sense data received in step 1 but about the phantasms produced in step 2.

[48] The sensible qualities of visible objects were thought to emit *species*, or replicas of themselves, which carried not the matter but the formal likeness of objects to the eye (and other senses). Though devoid of matter, *species* nevertheless leave material impressions upon sense organs: this imprint is sensation. See Clark, *Vanities*, 15–18.

[49] Some of these operations include sorting and combining impressions from different sense organs; generalizing particulars, e.g., a round, red, sweet-smelling object, to universals, e.g., an apple; and even adjudicating the relevance of visible objects to the observer, e.g., good to eat.

[50] I use the term "see" to denote what we might call understanding, as in "I 'see' what you mean." I use the term absent its quotation marks in its primary sense of discerning visually, as in "I see the house."

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This deliberately schematic overview brings me to two critical vocabulary notes. As I just explained – but it cannot be overstated – early modern Europeans understood vision (indeed, all sense experience) to result directly from step 2. I will call this experience "perception" as a way of clarifying, for contemporary readers, that it is a result of steps 1 (sensation) and 2 (imagination) together, and *not* step 1 alone.[51] Although I will discuss my preference for this term at length in Chapter 1, it should be immediately clarified that I am using "perception" not as a synonym for understanding but in its primary meaning of receiving and becoming aware of something through the senses.[52] As my heuristic, step-based explanation is designed to highlight, "perception" – a creature's instantaneous visual and other sensory experience of its surroundings – is the result of more than step 1 but occurs prior to and without the intervention of step 3. What all this means is that, for a pre-Cartesian mind, perception is not the result of thinking. It is the result of sensing and then imagining. As we will discover, this distinction makes all the difference.

This brings me to my second vocabulary note. Throughout this book, I will use "imagination," as sixteenth-century Europeans increasingly did, to refer to the entire nexus of processing operations that account for step 2 in the 3-step model. This is not to be confused with a later notion – associated with Kant and the German Idealists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – where the imagination is an autonomous activity, independent of both sensation and reason, and subject to one's conscious will.[53] I also do not deploy the term as a synonym for a Weltbild or mentalité.[54] Though the early modern imagination can be thought of as an image-producing faculty, what is critical for our purposes is that the

[51] The literature on this phenomenon and the faculties believed to produce it does not have a single preferred term for the capacity, perhaps because early modern Europeans do not seem to have possessed one. It has also been discussed (though in a slightly later historical moment and without the mechanical specificity of my account) under the heading of "apprehension," as in Adam Rzepka, "'How Like a God': Shakespeare and Early Modern Apprehension," *Shakespeare Studies* 46 (2018): 211–35.

[52] Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "perceive," accessed February 24, 2025. Oxford English Dictionary, "perception (n.)," last updated September 2024.

[53] Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 111–12.

[54] On the difficulty of defining and studying a concept as diverse and expansive as imagination, see Anna Abraham, "Surveying the Imagination Landscape," in *The Cambridge Handbook of the Imagination*, ed. Anna Abraham (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 3–5. Note that this overview only looks across disciplines; it does not include different understandings of the imagination across historical periods – a variable that makes this challenge even more matrixed.

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images it generates should – that is, under normal or healthy conditions – be mimetic of sense impressions received by the body. What this also means is that the phantasms produced by the imagination are neither morally neutral nor conceptually ancillary. On the contrary, because they *constitute* visual perception, they decisively control and can compromise the conscious mind's access to sense data. To say that another way: we are not here concerned with an independent image-producing faculty but with the processing nexus that actively mediates a creature's moment-to-moment experience of its surroundings (its "perception"). As such, the "imagination" I reference throughout this study is the single broker between sensations coming from the extramental world and even the possibility of rationally analyzing them.

I linger over this vocabulary because with this language, I attempt to hold space for a phenomenon for which Renaissance Europeans had no single term, but which they everywhere assumed and implied – namely, the operations whereby sense impressions are unconsciously but decisively conditioned (in and by the "imagination") even before the resulting phantasms become the basis for conscious thought. The "perception" that results from this imaginative processing is not merely a matter of mental images held in the mind's eye: it *is* a person's visual experience – indeed, their entire sensory experience – of the extramental world. This distinguishes my study from treatments of imagination that are primarily concerned with the existence and nature of mental images. What I wish to spotlight instead is the effect of imaginative operations upon subsequent perception.

Indeed, the processes that produce perception – in this model, sensation (step 1) followed by imagination (step 2) – are the processes by which sixteenth-century Europeans explained how we see stimuli in front of us not merely as a collection of colors and shapes but as synthetic wholes, a person we orient toward as a friend, or an animal we orient away from as a threat. They are also the processes that medieval and Renaissance scholars called upon to explain dreams and sensory delusions, as well as to answer such complex questions as how we perceive temporal succession (for example, the ring of fire seen when a flame is whirled rapidly in a circle) and even how we see in three dimensions.[55]

[55] For dreams and sensory delusions, see Clark, *Vanities*, 301–2 and 52–54, 59–62, respectively. For temporal succession and three-dimensionality, see Juhana Toivanen, "Perceiving As: Non-Conceptual Forms of Perception in Medieval Philosophy," in *Medieval Perceptual Puzzles: Theories of Sense Perception in the 13th and 14th Centuries*, ed. Elena Băltuță (Brill, 2020), 11–14.

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I also linger over this vocabulary because it was the nexus of the imagination that collapsed after key optical developments in the early seventeenth century led to the 2-step post-Cartesian model most of us presume today.[56] To summarize a story that has been well told elsewhere,[57] a paradigm shift in visual culture, exemplified by the work of German astronomer Johannes Kepler and French philosopher René Descartes, ultimately eliminated the explanatory role for step 2 in the pre-Cartesian model.[58] Kepler's discovery of the retinal image introduced a firm distinction between the physiology of vision, restricted to the mechanism of the eye, and the psychology of vision, whereby the rational mind judges what the eye sees. As A. Mark Smith explains, the theory of the retinal image implies "an impermeable wall that separates the eye from the brain and, thus, the objective cause from the subjective effects of vision."[59] Where previously, objective data melded with subjective interpretation in the unconscious processing work of the imagination, these two sources of visual experience were now cleanly divided between eye and brain. Decades later, Descartes' theory of mental imaging would substitute mechanical stimuli, "encoded traces," for the *species* that were previously thought to connect extramental and mental reality through two sets of nearly identical imprints.[60]

[56] In the first, physiological, step, light is recorded as a stimulus on the receptive surface of the retina. In the second, psychological, step, the brain generates an extraordinarily rapid interpretation of the significance of the data received from the retina. In this Cartesian paradigm, perception (i.e., visual experience) results from this second step.

[57] For accounts of this paradigm shift, see David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (University of Chicago Press, 1976), 188, 200–202; A. Mark Smith, *From Sight to Light: The Passage from Ancient to Modern Optics* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 354–72, 408–16; and Clark, *Vanities*, 329–64.

[58] At roughly the same time, between the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, anatomical developments cast doubt on the existence of the various sub-functions that were previously understood to make up the imagination. For this story, see Simon Kemp and Garth J. O. Fletcher, "The Medieval Theory of the Inner Senses," *The American Journal of Psychology* 106, no. 4 (1993): 565–68. For a brief overview of the cultural implications of this transition, see "Early Modern Visualities" in Stelzer, *Portraits in Early Modern English Drama*, especially 30–35.

[59] Smith, *Sight to Light*, 369. From this point, as Nelson observes, "the act of seeing . . . is on the way to becoming neutral, abstract, and positivistic." Nelson, "Descartes's Cow," 6.

[60] See Smith, *Sight to Light*, 410–14; quoted text from 413. Indeed, as Jay explains, in his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes explicitly rejects the dictum, "nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses," thus challenging the long-standing priority of sensation in knowing and arguing instead for the primacy of understanding over sensation. Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 73. Descartes also expresses this view in the third discourse of his 1637 *Optics* when he states that "it is the mind which senses, not the body." Descartes, quoted in Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 75.

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The combined effect of Kepler's and Descartes' contributions was to institute a clear separation between the objective stimuli of vision and the subjective determinants of sight. This neat and tidy division between physical and mental, or physiological and psychological, now resolves into the two halves of the visual model that came to dominate in and after the seventeenth century, a model that effectively preserves only what I have called step 1 (albeit without *species*) and step 3.[61]

It is the "imagination" in other words – and with it, the distinctive sixteenth-century understanding of what I am calling "perception" – that drops out of view in the century after the *Institutes* is composed. In our post-seventeenth century interpretive milieu, it makes sense to speak, as we so often do, of "eye and mind." In the moment proper to the *Institutes*, however, this dichotomy does not apply: the imagination intervenes and decisively shapes the commerce between material eye and rational mind. As I outline in Chapter 1, this paradigm shift changes the interpretive options at our disposal when we contemplate Calvin's many descriptions of perceptual misfire unto delusion. In a post-Cartesian milieu, it makes sense to suggest that perception goes astray when we misinterpret sense data. But this formulation is incoherent in a properly sixteenth-century context, where the intellectual work of judgment has no direct access to sense data, pondering such data only through the phantasms composed by imagination.

Let me emphasize that from a historical perspective, the pre-Cartesian 3-step mental model was not an esoteric corner of early modern philosophy. Notwithstanding ongoing debates about its specifics, a minimum viable version of this framework operated as a baseline working consensus among educated, Latin-reading Europeans of the sixteenth century. Indeed, every detail I will reference across this study would have been considered part of a standard education in Aristotelian natural philosophy. Calvin's well-documented humanistic education makes it reasonable to presume his familiarity with it.[62]

[61] For an exploration of how the distinctive conceptual and technological affordances of this seventeenth-century visual culture show up in texts of the period, see Webster, *The Curious Eye*.

[62] François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (Harper & Row, 1963), 15–26; and Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (Yale University Press, 2009), 5–8, 18–30, and 31–33. Gordon highlights Calvin's study of Aristotle on p. 25. As Christopher B. Kaiser has shown, the reformer was cognizant of, and seems to have largely accepted, various Aristotelian views that were both more arcane and more contested than these basic premises. Kaiser, "Calvin's Understanding of Aristotelian

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But what is the rationale for bringing this model to bear on the *Institutes*? In addition to the fact that these distinctions were broadly assumed by learned sixteenth-century Europeans, Calvin makes casual reference to debates about them in Book I of the *Institutes*. While it is widely recognized that the reformer approves a traditional division of the rational soul into intellect (*intellectus*) and will (*voluntas*),[63] what has received less attention is the fact the *Institutes* also explicitly acknowledges the step-2 activities by which sense impressions are processed *after* their receipt by the exterior senses (step 1) but *before* the operations traditionally ascribed to said rational soul (step 3).[64] Far more consequentially, the text itself seems to assume a working knowledge of these processes in its readers. As I will show, Calvin uses vocabulary throughout the *Institutes* that evokes key assumptions of a 3-step mental model – and does so in ways that are both internally consistent and highly pointed.

Being self-conscious about the mental model we bring to the *Institutes*' perceptual themes is important for at least two reasons. The first has to do with the sea change in visual culture that lies between our moment and the *Institutes*' sixteenth-century composition. One result of seventeenth-century developments in the field of optics was to eliminate the notion of physical *species* and their related "resemblance model," which located visual integrity in the imprinting process I have outlined above. Previously, *species* and the imagination together ensured a through-line from corporeal sensations to incorporeal thoughts, because *species* from step 1 physically contributed to the phantasms formed in step 2, and the phantasms resulting from step 2 were the basis of step 3. This gives issues related to the imagination the highest possible epistemological stakes: its operations entirely determine whether the conscious mind has trustworthy access to the world around it. Taking this role seriously not only reveals some enduring characterizations of the *Institutes* as anachronisms but also opens fertile interpretive territory for making new sense of Calvin's many overt and covert references to imagination's influence upon perception.

Natural Philosophy: Its Extent and Possible Origins," in *Calviniana: Ideas and Influence of Jean Calvin*, ed. Robert V. Schnucker (Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1988), 77–92.

[63] See, for example, Richard A. Muller, "*Fides* and *Cognitio* in Relation to the Problem of Intellect and Will in the Theology of John Calvin," *Calvin Theological Journal* 25, no. 2 (1990): 212; and Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 135.

[64] See Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.6.

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The second reason has to do with the acute instability that characterized visual experience in this precise cultural moment. As Stuart Clark has established, between 1500 and 1700, visual certainty was so called into question that seeing itself came to be associated with unreliability. Concerns about the security of visual experience, and thus sensory epistemology, cut across discourses as diverse as optics, painting, demonology – and of course, religion. Against this backdrop, it became an urgent question how to secure what we might call the "chain of custody" that connects the conscious mind to extramental reality. And yet, from about the fifteenth century onward, a host of anomalies had undermined the explanatory power of this very model. Caught between the breakdown of the Aristotelian model of vision and the seventeenth-century innovations of Kepler and Descartes, sixteenth-century Europeans were painfully aware that they did not have an unassailable explanation for visual experience. And that meant they could not be entirely confident about how to protect it.

Compounding concerns about the regnant model's explanatory power, vision's vulnerability to pre-conscious manipulation – whether internally, by the machinations of a rogue imagination, or externally, through the influence of witches or demons – became a widespread issue among Renaissance thinkers (which, I need not add, includes the reformers). Ultimately, mounting unease about the influence of pre-conscious factors upon visual experience led early modern Europeans to entertain, as Clark says, "the modern-sounding notion that human subjects 'make' the objects they perceive, fashioning them out of the qualities that belong intrinsically to perception, not to the objects themselves."[65] I underline this point because it adds a new and important layer to our appreciation of Reformation epistemological upheaval. When we think about the context in which Calvin and his fellow reformers worked and wrote, we should think of not only widespread ideological uncertainty but also perceptual contingency. The result was to dramatize the question: How can we be sure that what we take to be reality is an accurate reflection of what is outside the mind, and not a figment from within it?

Calvin's opening references to mis- and re-calibrated lightness perception, with which I began this Introduction, are a case in point. Optical illusions were popular amusements for early modern European people as they are for audiences today. But in the sixteenth century, they *also*

[65] Clark, *Vanities*, 4 and 6.

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indexed high-stakes concerns about how to ensure our own minds don't deceive us about the world around us. If today we enjoy being astonished by visual tricks that are born out of and thus implicitly underline how much we *know* about visual experience, for sixteenth-century observers, visual illusions were an unsettling reminder of what early modern people *knew they didn't know*. In its early modern milieu, Calvin's commentary on the relativity of human perception and its susceptibility to sin-induced distortion raises troubling questions that draw their power partly from, and would have resonated ominously against, this cultural backdrop. For the moment, the punchline here is methodological rather than theological: it is this sixteenth-century context that must inform the way we read the *Institutes*' many references to vision and blindness.[66]

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE PRESENT VOLUME

In returning the *Institutes* to this context, *Calvin and Perception* reveals that "perception" as I have defined it is a central organizing concern of Calvin's most-studied text. Calvin's account of how sinful humans suffer from perceptual distortion capitalizes upon what was for sixteenth-century readers a very live possibility – namely, that visual experience can be conditioned, and thus distorted, by subjective conditions of a perceiver. In both content and form, the *Institutes* evokes a condition in which humans think they see perceptible reality for what it is, when in fact imaginative malfunction has duped them into taking black for white. In this way, the text both reflects and creatively leverages the perceptual instability that marked this pivotal period in early modern European history.

Ultimately, I will make the case that the *Institutes* presents sin as affecting primarily the unconscious processing performed by the imagination, at what I have called step 2 of the model. This raises the intriguing possibility that step 2 is also the primary target of theological and spiritual rehabilitation. If this is the case, then the text's central formative goals vis-à-vis its audience may lie not in instilling true and warranted beliefs nor in teaching the proper interpretation of signs – in short, not in shaping any step-3 operation. Rather, the ultimate work of the text, and the way it conduces to piety, may be to discipline the imagination and thus to safeguard the integrity of perception – which is to say, the integrity of a

[66] See Rzepka's remarks on the importance (and relative neglect) of "historical models of the mind" in scholarship's effort to historicize the material and embodied dimensions of literary texts and contexts. Rzepka, "How Like a God," 230–31.

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person's pre-conscious visual (and other sensory) experience of their environment.

Returning the *Institutes* to its original optical context not only addresses an unwritten chapter in Europe's history of the senses. The exercise also sheds light on the *Institutes*' interpretive history, which points to a possible reason it has not been treated as a work centrally concerned with "perception" in the technical sense I am employing it. Simply put, we already had a conceptual category into which to place Calvin's infamous text – and that category directed us to step 3. William J. Bouwsma, an eminently sensitive reader of Calvin's work, described the *Institutes* as "a discourse about knowledge."[67] Edward A. Dowey Jr. one of the greatest interpreters of this theme in Calvin's work and another highly subtle reader of the reformer, declared that knowledge "is the fundamental and central category of Calvin's theological thought."[68] This interpretive legacy raises the possibility that the *Institutes*' visual motifs have not been so much overlooked, as interpreted according to a different paradigm – namely, an implicitly post-Cartesian idiom in which "blindness" results from a problem with judgment and "seeing" names an achievement of knowledge.

Even recent interpreters who have gone out of their way to qualify the rather starkly propositional connotations of "knowledge" in connection with the *Institutes* have not unseated the term as our label for the text's central concern.[69] But to maintain that the *Institutes* is a book about "knowledge" implies that for Calvin, the problem of fallen life has essentially to do with information or belief – that it's ignorance, misunderstanding, or misinterpretation of the facts that prevents humans from relating to God as God intends. What if, instead, Calvin's concern is better described as delusion – a condition perpetrated by an untrustworthy imagination that distorts the thrust of sense experience before it

[67] Bouwsma, "Calvin and the Renaissance Crisis of Knowing," *Calvin Theological Journal* 17, no. 2 (1982): 202.

[68] Dowey, "The Structure of Calvin's Theological Thought as Influenced by the Two-Fold Knowledge of God," in *Calvinus ecclesiae Genevensis custos: die Referate des Congrès International des Recherches Calviniennes*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (Peter Lang, 1984), 138. For a comparison between Calvin's account of "knowledge of God" and that of several medieval theologians as well as some of his early modern contemporaries, see David C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2010), 25–32.

[69] See, for example, the qualifications acknowledged at Helm, *Calvin's Ideas*, 222, juxtaposed to the definition of the "knowledge of God" Helm offers on 224–25. For more dramatic qualifications, see Matthew Myer Boulton, *Life in God: John Calvin, Practical Formation, and the Future of Protestant Theology* (Eerdmans, 2011), 83.

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can even reach the judging and interpreting operations of the conscious mind? While earlier treatments have approached the *Institutes* through implicit dualities like the clarity versus obscurity of knowledge,[70] the truth versus falsehood of theological articulations,[71] or the interpretation versus misinterpretation of evidence and signs,[72] *Calvin and Perception* approaches Calvin's magnum opus through an alternative paradigm, perception versus delusion.[73]

Is perception a genuinely new paradigm for interpreting the *Institutes*? No – and yes. To foreground perception is to name a concern that, we might say, has been at the tip of scholarship's tongue for the last two decades. From David C. Steinmetz's reference to "human misperception because of sin,"[74] to Susan E. Schreiner's description of sin as causing "perceptual breakdown,"[75] to Bruce Gordon's observation that for Calvin "sin obscures reality,"[76] to Matthew Myer Boulton's argument that the problem for Calvin is "oblivion" that has to do with "sense and sensibility, awareness and experience, perception and insight"[77] – there is wide agreement that for Calvin, sin has deleterious effects on something usefully called "perception."

What is notable about such treatments – and the way they, in some sense, call forth the present project – is the absence of historical contextualization or the precise definition it makes possible. That is, despite its increasing appearance in our scholarly vocabulary, scholarship has not clarified how "perception" relates to sixteenth-century Europeans' ideas about the mind's operations, including what functions of the brain generate perception and whether or how it involves acts of judgment or

[70] As an influential instance, see Edward A. Dowey Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, 3rd ed. (Eerdmans, 1994).

[71] For example, see Ford Lewis Battles, "Calculus Fidei: Some Ruminations on the Structure of the Theology of John Calvin," in *Calvinus ecclesiae doctor: die Referate des Congrès International de Recherches Calviniennes*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (Kok, 1980), 85 and 90–94.

[72] For example, Paul Helm, "John Calvin, the *sensus divinitatis*, and the Noetic Effects of Sin," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43 (1998): 100–101; and Michelle Chaplin Sanchez, *Calvin and the Resignification of the World: Creation, Incarnation, and the Problem of Political Theology in the 1559* Institutes (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 55, 58, and 60.

[73] This is similar in some respects to Boulton's radiance versus oblivion distinction, except that he traces the problem to the "faculty of understanding." See Boulton, *Life in God*, 93–95.

[74] Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 29.

[75] Schreiner, *Theater of His Glory*, 121.

[76] Gordon, *Calvin's* Institutes, 20–21.

[77] Boulton, *Life in God*, 85.

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interpretation.[78] This oversight is especially noticeable in discussions of Calvin's epistemology, where the word sometimes appears paired with or even presented in apposition to terms that seem squarely located in what I have called the step-3 operations of the conscious mind. For example, Barbara Pitkin treats "knowledge, certainty, and perception" as a "heuristic trinity."[79] Michelle Chaplin Sanchez includes perception in another trinity: cognition, affect, and perception.[80] Paul Helm has described the condition known as the "knowledge of God" as being "like perception."[81] In none of these representative cases is "perception" located and defined in relation to a sixteenth-century, or indeed any, mental model. Moreover – and perhaps as a result – these formulations at least obscure, if they do not elide, the pivotal distinction between perception (step 2) and cognition (step 3).[82]

Habits of language are telling, particularly so when keywords go undefined. The prevalence of this term in recent publications on Calvin leads me to wonder whether invoking "perception" is appealing because it softens the edges of our continued claims about cognitive phenomena like "judgments," "interpretations," and "knowledge," without forcing us to displace them from the center of our collective thinking. It is as if invoking perception allows us to do poetic justice to the "directness ...

[78] This characterization also holds for treatments of "vision" and the "visual" in connection with Calvin's writings, such as those by Zachman, Pak, and Capps cited above. Chapter 5 addresses this gap by connecting a historically relevant model of vision to historically relevant rhetorical premises regarding the visual affordances of language.

[79] Pitkin, *What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin's Doctrine of Faith in Its Exegetical Context* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 161.

[80] Sanchez, *Calvin and the Resignification*, 130. This characterization is repeated in Michelle Chaplin Sanchez, "Calvin, Difficult Arguments, and Affective Responses: Providence as a Case Study in Method," *The Journal of Religion* 99, no. 4 (2019): 469.

[81] Helm, "John Calvin," 91.

[82] A striking case is Schreiner's *Theater of His Glory*, one of the first studies to employ the term "perception" extensively. Schreiner uses the word not only to describe the capacity to "perceive God in nature" that's lost in the fall (*Theater of His Glory*, 67) but also to describe what becomes possible again through rehabilitation – namely, "the renewed mind can perceive more and more clearly that God is a 'propitious Father'" (*Theater of His Glory*, 105). Here, as in more recent accounts, "perception" goes undefined and is sometimes either elided with or attributed to an act of reason. For example, though Schreiner speaks in one breath about "the effect of sin on natural perception," she glosses this immediately as "that which fallen reason can no longer understand or which it now perceives only dimly" (*Theater of His Glory*, 78). Ultimately, though Schreiner elevates the concern with "perception" in Calvin's natural theology, her study explains neither what it is nor how it works, under fallen or rehabilitated conditions.

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immediacy,"[83] even the "spontaneity,"[84] as well as the concern for "embodied" and "material" practice[85] that so many scholars now recognize in Calvin's theology but cannot explain against implicitly Cartesian premises about the mind's operations. Perhaps that is why scholars continue to think and write about the *Institutes* as a book primarily concerned with knowledge even as our emphasis on the pedagogical use of texts chips away at the idea that the *Institutes* is first and foremost a repository for propositional claims and a vehicle for information transfer.[86]

Against this backdrop, the contribution of the present project is to ground this line of thought – suggested by a chorus of scholars who intuitively find "perception" to be a useful term – in a properly sixteenth-century account of visual perception. This historicizing work will allow us to move beyond the field's repeated observations about the existence of perceptual themes in the *Institutes* to a dedicated analysis of them – an analysis that makes use of the very same explanatory mechanism that early modern Europeans widely availed themselves of (namely, the imagination's unconscious but decisive influence, for good or for ill, upon visual perception). Grounding our reading in a specific account of perception – where this phenomenon is clearly distinguished from acts of understanding and interpretation (and specifically, defined as their preconscious prerequisite) – adds historical ballast to our conversations about "perception" and the other potential outcomes of Calvin's theology. But though this intervention is methodological in nature, it is theological in its implications: supplying the "straightedge" of pre-Cartesian visual assumptions ultimately leads to significantly different conclusions – different, even, from previous studies where the word "perception" has also appeared.[87]

Any interpretive model necessarily illuminates some features of a text, while casting others in shadow. A perception versus delusion framework sheds light on the *Institutes*' sensory, and especially visual, language.

[83] Helm, "John Calvin," 91. [84] Boulton, *Life in God*, 65.
[85] Sanchez, *Calvin and the Resignification*, 53.
[86] A position nicely summarized at Sanchez, *Calvin and the Resignification*, 45–46.
[87] To take the most recent example: Sanchez concludes that God is only "materialized" as an "object of perception" through the "use of signs that relate God's existence to features of the created world itself." "Divine appearances" are, as she says, "always the result of an operation of signification." Sanchez, *Calvin and the Resignification*, 68. As I will discuss in this study's Conclusion, this account entails both more human agency and more conscious cognitive activity than I find in the *Institutes*' portrait of perception.

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It highlights the many implicit and explicit ways the text draws attention to the process of perception – including the reader's own perception. Ultimately, entertaining this paradigm shifts our view of the work as a whole. Traditionally and still hailed as a discourse about knowledge,[88] the *Institutes* instead appears concerned with safeguarding the chain of custody whereby sense impressions are accurately received and perceived before being registered in the conscious mind. The theologian infamous for his view of sin as depravity now appears more concerned with the way sin subverts pre-conscious perception of the external world.

Let me be clear, however, that attending to perception does not exclude considerations about how accurate percepts (that is, trustworthy products of step 2) are built into knowledge (in step 3). On this account, step-3 operations like inferring from evidence and applying conscious interpretations to external experience result from and can, in turn, condition perception. Indeed, in Chapter 4, I address the specific role of doctrine in facilitating perceptual rehabilitation. What I am suggesting is not that doctrinal knowledge is unimportant in the *Institutes*. I am suggesting that conscious knowledge of doctrine is fundamentally secondary to the pre-conscious operations of perception as far as the stakes of the *Institutes* are concerned. That is, the result of applying a perception versus delusion framework to the *Institutes* is to shift our understanding of the central challenge Calvin explores: from knowing what is true – or even, interpreting what is correct – to perceiving what is real.

But the exercise of supplying a historical grounding for our collective discussion of Calvin and "perception" is only as useful as the interpretive impasses the effort enables us to overcome. Accordingly, my account is designed to address tantalizing questions raised, both implicitly and explicitly, by previous commentators. It will give us purchase for addressing the puzzle Pitkin poses at the end of her landmark treatment of faith, namely: "Does the eye of faith actually *see*, or . . . [is it] only the case that it *trusts* in a hidden reality?"[89] It will also allow us to resolve an ambiguity Zachman elevates in his compendium of word and image in Calvin's theology. When Zachman lands on the deliberately tentative formulation that God becomes "somewhat visible" to human perceivers,[90] what is the nature of the qualification indicated by "somewhat"? Other unresolved issues attend the relationship between visual perception and the perceptible dimensions of writing itself. Indeed, this relationship seems to sit at

[88] As in Sanchez, *Calvin and the Resignification*, 49 and 55.
[89] Pitkin, *Pure Eyes*, 162. Emphases in the original. [90] Zachman, *Image and Word*, 2.

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the origin of John Bossy's infamous puzzlement regarding the eloquence of Calvin's prose. If, as the historian remarks cheekily, "[Calvin] wrote more eloquently than was decent for a theologian," what does this suggest about language's appropriate uses vis-à-vis perception?[91] And how – to repeat the question John Slotemaker poses in his review of Zachman's study – should we understand the dynamic between visual and verbal imagery in Calvin's theology?[92]

The present project hopes to advance beyond these impasses by answering several overarching questions that lie behind – or out in front of – these puzzles, namely: in what sense and by what natural or supernatural mechanisms does Calvin exhort his readers to see God? What is the role of theological language, both its content and its form, in facilitating this capacity? In this way, *Calvin and Perception* advances an important intermittent line of discussion not only in Calvin scholarship but in Reformation studies more broadly – namely, the oft-raised but little elaborated possibility that Calvin and the other reformers are not eliminating but "reforming" the role of vision in religious life.[93] Understanding the mechanisms that enable or disable accurate perception becomes indispensable if we want to arrive at a historicized understanding of how this could occur. Doing so will enrich our sense of the "noetic consequences" of both sin and redemption by elaborating their distinct *aesthetic* dimensions – as these might have been understood by sixteenth-century Europeans.

METHODOLOGY: CALVIN VERSUS THE *INSTITUTES*

In this study, I deal exclusively with the 1559 edition of the *Institutes* for several reasons. First, after being re-edited and republished over many

[91] Bossy, *Christianity in the West: 1400–1700* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 102. Bossy is referencing a sentiment expressed by Renaissance classicist Joseph Justus Scaliger.

[92] "The most significant methodological question that arises in [Zachman's *Image and Word*] is how to interpret passages in scripture that discuss or rely on visual imagery, but are clearly textual (as written words themselves)." John Slotemaker, "Review of *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* by Randall Zachman," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 40, no. 2 (2009): 623.

[93] We find gestures along these lines in several late twentieth-century scholars, including Scribner, "Perceptions of the Sacred," 102–3; Scribner, "Popular Piety," 465 and 469; and Scribner, "Ways of Seeing," 103–4. See also Margaret R. Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Beacon Press, 1985), 124; Miles, "Theology, Anthropology, and the Human Body in Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*," *The Harvard Theological Review* 74, no. 3 (1981): 304; and Huston Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England* (Cornell University Press, 1997), 46–66.

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years from its earliest edition in 1536,[94] Calvin declared that he was at last satisfied with this, the final version.[95] This editorial comment frames the work as a stand-alone product and thus indicates that at least for some purposes it can be analyzed in isolation from its editorial history. Second, the 1559 edition is the form of the text that was most frequently republished in succeeding decades, and arguably had the greatest impact on subsequent developments in Reformed theology. Indeed, it was the exclusive source of reprintings, translations, and abridgements until 1863.[96] Third, comparative studies of different editions have revealed distinctive features of this edition's Latin prose style[97] that are of particular interest to language's influence upon perception – an issue I explore in Chapter 5.

At this juncture, a reader who has found the project plausible to this point might demur: isn't it irresponsible to restrict this exploration of perception to the final edition of the *Institutes*? Isn't it the case that Calvin was *not* "a man of one book only," as T. H. L. Parker famously noted?[98] It is indisputable that there are striking perceptual motifs worth exploring in other corners of the reformer's oeuvre. Therefore, this study's restriction to the *Institutes* could be considered a weakness were my goal to amalgamate a single account of Calvin's probable views on perception. However, I follow Richard A. Muller in finding that type of project – one that seeks a doctrinal synthesis by collecting and combining views suggested by the *Institutes* with those in the reformer's commentaries, sermons, and treatises – to be questionable in its goals and impractical in its methods. Setting aside the thorny historiographical and literary question of whether and how a historical figure's written works can serve as a reliable guide to their personal views, the attempt to aggregate a single account of perception by surveying scattered comments from disparate texts would risk distorting, in Muller's words, "the patterns of organization" in the primary sources, with the result that "the actual

[94] For overviews of the successive editions of the *Institutes*, see John T. McNeill, "Introduction," in Calvin, *Institutes*, xxxiii–xlviii and Jean-François Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, trans. Karin Maag (Truman State University Press, 2005), 39–44.

[95] John Calvin, "John Calvin to the Reader," in Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.

[96] McNeill, "Introduction," xxxvii.

[97] On this, see Olivier Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole: Étude de rhétorique réformée* (Honoré Champion, 1992), 861–64 and 867–70.

[98] Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 2nd ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 6–7.

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intention underlying Calvin's arguments can be obscured, the context of a remark can be lost, and the meaning and significance of a point mistaken."[99]

When we set aside the ambition of harmonizing a single view attributed to John Calvin, we are free to treat each of the reformer's individual works, including the *Institutes*, as literary artifacts of the sixteenth century[100] – complex textual objects whose quirks are best illumined by reference to their own claims, motifs, and stylistic qualities and not those of other works, with other properties, written at other times, for other audiences, and for other educational and polemical purposes. This is to accord Calvin the writer the same respect we give to early modern giants like Erasmus, Montaigne, and Burton – stylists whose epoch-making works have been analyzed holistically and in explicit conversation with broader themes in Renaissance culture.[101]

The goal of this book is thus not to illuminate the mind or motivations of the French reformer, nor to contribute to an account of how his thought evolved, nor to build a portrait of his views independent of individual works. Indeed, I can hardly think of a critique more damning than being accused of offering an account of "Calvin's doctrine of perception."[102] Instead, I intend *Calvin and Perception* as an invitation to elevate the consideration of perception in our reading of the *Institutes* and, on the strength of this case study, Calvin's other writings. It is not a summary of "Calvin *on* perception." That is, rather than pondering what John Calvin the man might have thought about perception, I wish to suggest that it would be profitable for us, as his readers, to ponder the stakes and uses of perception in his individual writings.

In this connection, I should note as an aside that when I use the name "Calvin" as the subject of the many sentences that follow, I refer primarily to the literary voice present in the *Institutes*, what Umberto Eco would

[99] Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 5 and 6, respectively.

[100] The phrase "literary artefact" is Ernst van den Hemel's. See "Tracing Circles: Literary Dimensions in John Calvin's *Institutes*" (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2011), 7. For an argument for foregrounding the literariness of Renaissance theological texts, see Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

[101] For a comparable project, see Mary Ann Lund, *Melancholy, Medicine and Religion in Early Modern England: Reading* The Anatomy of Melancholy (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[102] I shudder to imagine being the target of Muller's devastating critique. Muller, *Unaccommodated Calvin*, 6–7.

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call the model author.[103] Technically, it would be more accurate to refer only and ever to what "the *Institutes*" says and does. But I have been unable to break myself of the literary habit of unifying the text's strategies by attributing them to an implied author – this for the pragmatic reason that it becomes quite monotonous to repeat "the *Institutes*" as the subject of every sentence. By all accounts, "Calvin" the model author of the *Institutes* enjoys a bit of pleasing *varietas* in his nouns, and so do I.

To return to the question at hand: Does the methodological restriction to analyzing only passages from the *Institutes* weaken the thesis of the present study? Only if we assume that, to be a valid reading of Calvin's 1559 *Institutes*, the conclusions of this study must also apply without reserve or nuance to other writings from the same pen. In fact, however, there's a strong possibility (even, I suspect, a likelihood) that bringing visual culture to bear on other texts in the reformer's oeuvre would reveal that while the same basic mental model is assumed across Calvin's writings, concerns and connotations about vision are leveraged somewhat differently. And why not? As we know, even Calvin's own translation of the *Institutes* into French is different enough to be considered practically a distinct work[104] – a contrast that has been interpreted to reflect the French work's more popular audience as compared with the Latin edition.[105] Indeed, it is by now a truism to observe that, as a writer, Calvin was exquisitely sensitive to audience and context.[106] When we consider how readership, occasion, and genre shape each of Calvin's texts, we should anticipate that these considerations also affect how its implied visual culture (for every text has one) is uniquely leveraged through the text's content and form (for this can happen in diverse ways).

[103] Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 15 and 24. The exception, of course, is when I invoke John Calvin the man's education and probable experience as a relevant element of the text's historical backdrop.

[104] Gordon, *Calvin's* Institutes, xii.

[105] On the intended audience of the 1559 Latin *Institutes*, see Gilmont, *Printed Book*, 115; and Randall C. Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian: The Shape of His Writings and Thought* (Baker Academic, 2006), 81–83. Given the differences between them, resorting to the French edition to illuminate the Latin text seems to raise more questions than it answers. I have thus resisted the temptation to interpret the Latin text with reference to Calvin's own 1560 French translation. See Millet, *Calvin*, 829–70.

[106] For representative discussions, see Randall C. Zachman, "Calvin's Interpretation of Scripture," in *Calvin: The Man and the Legacy*, ed. Murray Rae, Peter Matheson, and Brett Knowles (ATF Press, 2014), 110; and Zachman, "'Do You Understand What You Are Reading?' Calvin's Guidance for the Reading of Scripture," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no. 1 (2001): 9–10.

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Ultimately then, though it may be objectionable to take on a topic as expansive as perception through the study of a single text, I find the alternative to be more objectionable. I also take comfort in the fact that I do not read Calvin in a vacuum. Advancing our shared understanding of Calvin's writings is a shared task. In this spirit, I invite other researchers to explore how early modern visual culture illumines texts other than the *Institutes* in similar or, as I suspect, different ways.

OVERVIEW OF THIS STUDY'S CONTENTS

Chapter 1 of *Calvin and Perception* gives a more fulsome account of early modern visual culture, which I am proposing forms one crucial and heretofore missing context for our reading of the *Institutes*. I have devoted an entire chapter to outlining this backdrop because the relevant insights are at present scattered across the secondary literature on early modern history of the senses, history of science, and art history – to name but a few subfields where scholars are shedding light on historically distinctive dimensions of visual practice and experience in early modern Europe. Accordingly, Chapter 1 provides additional texture on the inner workings, outstanding questions, and vulnerable points of the 3-step model outlined above.

Following this, I trace how instability related to steps 1 and 2 of this mental model reverberated across several domains of early modern culture. Moving quickly through and connecting developments in optics, art, popular magic, religion, witchcraft, and demonology, these sections offer a composite though by no means exhaustive picture of the visual culture in which the *Institutes* was composed and in which Calvin's first generation of readers encountered the work. My hope in presenting this material together in summary form is that the account should serve as a usable primer for evaluating not only this interpretation of the *Institutes*, but also perceptual motifs in other early modern texts, whether by Calvin or another writer.

The concluding sections of Chapter 1 briefly situate some of the *Institutes*' key terminology within this cultural milieu and in this way offer initial interpretive warrant for bringing this backdrop to bear upon the text. Here I will have cause to return to the enduring characterization of the *Institutes* as a book about "knowledge" and to elaborate my proposal that the term "perception" better captures its epistemological stakes. The full value of the resulting perception versus delusion paradigm will, of course, need to be judged by its interpretive fruits, which unfold over the remaining four chapters.

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To say that perception is a central concern of the *Institutes* raises the question, perception of what? Chapter 2 answers this question by situating the reader in early modern assumptions related to theatrical and artistic viewing, both of which Calvin invokes in the opening pages of the text. From a close reading of these tone-setting discussions, I derive the perceptual ideal of the *Institutes* – namely, a condition of "spectatorship" in which humans directly encounter God's fatherly stance toward them through sense experience and respond instantaneously with a posture Calvin calls "piety." This portrait allows me to add additional texture to the early modern mental model described above. By grounding our reading of spectatorship in relevant assumptions about the evaluative and affective dimensions of imaginative processing and their unconscious but highly significant influence upon visual perception, we'll be able to appreciate how a sixteenth-century reader might have understood the physiological basis for a reaction like a spectator's, where steps 1 and 2 together are sufficient to induce piety, before step 3 need, or even can, occur.

Like the *Institutes* itself, this discussion begins from the perception of creation, then expands to embrace the other "accommodations" that Calvin's God has crafted as designated stimuli for human perception. Although the theme of accommodation has been much studied, it has never yet been connected to the matter of visual perception.[107] Approached through this lens, we recognize two defining features of accommodations as Calvin depicts them in the *Institutes*. First, accommodations are characterized by qualities that make them appealing to the human capacities engaged in spectatorship – namely, the senses and imagination, or steps 1 and 2 of the model. Second, accommodations have a consistent function, which is to facilitate perception of the divine fatherliness that, according to Calvin, naturally elicits a response of piety. By the end of this discussion, we'll understand what there is to perceive – namely, divine fatherliness rendered literally perceptible in

[107] This discussion will answer the call, issued by David F. Wright and subsequently articulated by several recent scholars, for an integrated portrait of how accommodation relates to other concepts in Calvin's work. See Wright, "Calvin's Accommodating God," in *Calvinus Sinceriorus Religionis Vindex: Calvin as Protector of the Purer Religion*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser and Brian G. Armstrong (Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997), 19. Jon Balserak and Arnold Huijgen each also take steps in this direction. See Balserak, *Divinity Compromised: A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin* (Springer, 2006), 137–62; and Huijgen, "Divine Accommodation and Divine Transcendence in John Calvin's Theology," in *Calvinus Sacrarum Literarum Interpres: Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 119–30.

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accommodations – as well as the stakes of accurate perception, which are nothing less than the possibility of relating piously to God.

This brings me to a motif that will weave throughout the book – namely, the role of scripture in facilitating perception of divine fatherliness. Calvin's views on scriptural interpretation are a generative topic in Calvin studies. I do not dedicate a chapter to this topic because scripture is an accommodation and treating it in isolation tends to obscure this accommodation's integral place in the host of elegantly choreographed measures that Calvin's God provides to facilitate human perception of divine fatherliness. Indeed, this is a disadvantage of scholarship's tendency to cite Calvin's principle of accommodation as a concept subordinate to his view of scripture – as just one among many characteristics of scriptural language as Calvin understands it[108] – when in fact, scripture is one instance of the much broader phenomenon that is accommodation.

Although I am far from the first to remark on the fact that accommodation extends beyond scripture, interpreting accommodation as a strategy for facilitating perception does open a new area of exploration – namely, the relevance of scriptural language to, and its work upon, fallen perception. Accordingly, when scripture periodically reappears across the remaining chapters, these cameos are intended to illustrate how new insights can emerge from asking a new question: not, what is the place and method of scriptural interpretation in Calvin's oeuvre[109] but rather, what does the *Institutes* suggest about the place and effect of scriptural language in the choreography of perceptual rehabilitation?

With a baseline understanding of accurate perception and its accommodated aids thus established, Chapter 3 interrogates the *Institutes*' portrait of sinful "blindness" to understand how sin gets in the way of accommodations' intended effect. Calvin's accusations of blindness are fundamentally linked to his critique of idolatry, so the project of this chapter is to trace the causes and consequences of this condition. The perceptual stakes of idolatry come into focus when we realize that every one of the vocabularies Calvin uses to describe idolatry was also used by early modern Europeans to describe a condition of imaginative

[108] For representative examples, see R. Ward Holder, *John Calvin and the Grounding of Interpretation: Calvin's First Commentaries* (Brill, 2006), 45–50; and John L. Thompson, "Calvin as a Biblical Interpreter," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 62.

[109] The present state of scholarship on these subjects is nicely summarized in Holder, *John Calvin*, 29–138. The canonical account of the relationship between the method of the *Institutes* and Calvin's other writings is Muller, *Unaccommodated Calvin*, 101–17.

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dysfunction where the imagination suppresses or slants the depiction of extramental stimuli, ultimately subverting accurate perception of the world and plunging the mind into literal delusion.

This discussion concludes by offering a new definition of idolatry as it appears in the *Institutes*. Whereas influential previous treatments have defined idolatry as a matter of fixation on visual or material objects,[110] this analysis reveals the condition to be practically the opposite, as a condition of self-inflicted imaginative delusion. On this reading, idolatry is not about looking too much; it's more a matter of seeing too little. At the end of this discussion, it will be clear why for Calvin the result of sin is blindness, a description we can now see is not a metaphor for ignorance or misunderstanding but a literal description of what happens when a sinful imagination malfunctions, distorting sense experience and preventing humans from perceiving the world as it is – most urgently, from seeing accommodations for what they are.

Chapter 4 marks a methodological break. In Chapters 2 and 3, I reinterpret sections of the *Institutes* where we observe concentrated perceptual motifs and in this way build a case for approaching the work through a perception versus delusion framework. By contrast, in Chapters 4 and 5, I test and elaborate this paradigm by exploring how it can illuminate yet other dimensions of the text.

Chapter 4 casts a wide net, touching briefly on a variety of doctrines to reconstruct the full program of perceptual rehabilitation the *Institutes* describes and commends. Dewey J. Hoitenga Jr. has observed that while Calvin has much to say about the noetic effects of sin, he is rather quiet on the "noetic effects of grace."[111] I hope to show, to the contrary, that one advantage of a perception versus delusion paradigm is the way it illuminates not the noetic, but the perceptual effects of grace. Specifically, I'll trace how these come about through a diverse set of mutually supporting

[110] Previous influential treatments have located accusations about idolatry in a rejection of material and visible representation, situating the topic in a traditional narrative about the Reformers' concerns regarding the relationship between words and images or spiritual and material. See Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 197–202 and 217; and Sergiusz Michalski, *The Reformation and the Visual Arts: The Protestant Image Question in Western and Eastern Europe* (Routledge, 1993), 61–63. Michalski elides the views of Karlstadt, Zwingli, and Calvin under the label "the iconophobes," suggesting that what unites them is the conviction that matter cannot be a vehicle of the spiritual.

[111] Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology* (State University of New York Press, 1991), 170.

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corrective measures that work together to offset and reverse the disastrous consequences of imaginative dysfunction.

This discussion will give me opportunity to outline how the theme of perception relates to a broad range of doctrinal loci in the *Institutes*, including the illumination of the Holy Spirit, union with Christ, the condition of faith, and Calvin's teachings on the law, justification, and predestination. Although the limitations of space will make these connections necessarily brief and suggestive, the purpose of this chapter is not to rehearse the full archive of existing scholarship on these topics or to offer new, ground-up readings. It is rather to lay groundwork indicating how we might be able to approach these teachings in a new light – that is, as they are drawn together into a new pattern by the theme of perception.

Along the way, we'll begin to see how exactly doctrine can play a role in perceptual rehabilitation, through the ability of conscious ideas to influence the pre-conscious operations of the imagination. Doctrines do this by arming the rational powers of the mind against the most common – and most pernicious – delusions that thwart accurate perception of accommodations and thereby forestall piety. Ultimately, this chapter yields a composite picture of how this suite of aids – comprising both perceptible stimuli and enabling conditions for accurate perception – makes it possible for humans to again approximate the perceptual ideal outlined in Chapter 2 under the fallen conditions described in Chapter 3.

Finally, Chapter 5 brings the proposed perception versus delusion paradigm to bear on the perennial question of the *Institutes*' nature and purpose. If Chapters 2 through 4 explore how the work's theological content relates to perception as I have defined it, this concluding chapter addresses the relevance of its prose style to perception. It asks: How does the *Institutes* address itself to a reader whose capacity to perceive accommodations continues to be stymied by sin? To answer this question, I track the suggestive connections between the uses of language that the *Institutes* commends and exhibits, on the one hand, and the distinctive needs of sin-blinded minds, on the other. Calvin's remarks about the unique affordances of scripture vis-à-vis perception form a crucial resource in this discussion, because they offer clues about how specific features of language could be used to address perception-occluding habits of mind.

This exercise requires further enriching the rhetorical context previous scholars have brought to the analysis of Calvin's prose – specifically, by elaborating a historically situated account of how language bears on imagination. Considering the *Institutes*' formal features against

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Renaissance premises regarding the qualities of language that best engage the imagination gives us a new approach to otherwise well-studied aspects of the *Institutes*' writing. It allows us to reconsider both the text's relatively under-questioned severe features, as well as its highly questioned vivid qualities – both of which come into focus differently against the text's concern with perception. The formal qualities of Calvin's major work take on new and different significance when compared to the needs of a reader who struggles to suppress the delusions described in Chapter 3 with the help of the aids narrated in Chapter 4, to again attain the ideal of perception described in Chapter 2.

SEEING OUR OWN MENTAL MODEL

In this study's Conclusion, I return to historical changes in visual culture – and related limitations in our reading methods – that, I submit, have made the *Institutes*' perceptual concerns difficult to see. I also outline several ways that approaching this highly influential text through a perception versus delusion framework makes a difference in matters of perennial interest, including Calvin's attitude toward the senses, his account of faith as a mode of perception, the relevance of verbal imagery in his work, and of course the problem with idolatry.

These transformations offer new purchase on the *Institutes*' purpose, which scholars have long agreed is "practical."[112] I hope to advance beyond this consensus by pushing on the "how": Granted that the work is intended to support piety,[113] by what practical means does it do so? Moreover, granted that the *Institutes*' purpose is not adequately captured by its apparent genre as a handbook of doctrinal *loci*, what nevertheless is the role of its doctrinal content in achieving more-than-merely doctrinal ends? Approached through the lens of perception, we can say that Calvin's practical project is not primarily persuading his readers to adopt true beliefs or attain knowledge; it is exhorting us to see the world for what it is – and not what we imagine it to be.

[112] In the mid-twentieth century, Dowey cited an already long tradition to this effect. Dowey, *Knowledge of God*, 25.

[113] See, as a representative example – for many could be cited – Brian G. Armstrong, "*Duplex cognitio Dei*, Or? The Problem and Relation of Structure, Form, and Purpose in Calvin's Theology," in *Probing the Reformed Tradition: Historical Studies in Honor of Edward A. Dowey, Jr.*, ed. Elsie Anne McKee and Brian G. Armstrong (Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 138–41. Similarly, see Boulton, *Life in God*, 66.

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Thus, I propose that the *Institutes*' "practical" project conduces to piety by way of rehabilitated perception, for piety on Calvin's account is the natural correlate of (accurate, i.e., non-delusive) perception. *Calvin and Perception* approaches the *Institutes* as a book "about perception" in two senses. First, as a work that narrates how perception can go astray through sin's influence. And second, as a work that, in both content and style, describes and enacts corrective measures designed to facilitate its readers' more accurate perception.

I conclude by considering a historical serendipity: today's postmodern visual culture may be more similar to the sixteenth-century milieu from which the *Institutes* emerged than any period since. Taken together, the diverse threats that shaped early modern visual culture evoke not merely subjectivity but even what today we might call visual constructivism[114] – the idea that visual experience is not discovered but made, shaped by the action of the mind and thus influenced by what influences it. The ways that visual experience can be shaped by internal conditions of the perceiver – conditions that operate prior to, beneath, and largely outside the direct control of the conscious mind – are also a concern in our own cultural moment, as we explore the ability of things like implicit bias and confirmation bias to influence not only our reactions but our very understanding of what is real. It may come as a surprise that despite possessing divergent models of the underlying mechanisms, this is a concern we share with sixteenth-century Europeans.

I have already highlighted Clark's striking observation that Calvin's contemporaries were considering the "modern-sounding notion" that the mind is active in perception, filtering and constructing the world it perceives – that, as he puts it, "visual experience had a cultural (that is, semiotic) foundation, not a natural one."[115] If what Clark calls the "incipient visual relativism"[116] of early modern European visual culture bears some resemblance to our own understanding of the cultural specificity and constructedness of vision, then we may have the best chance yet of recognizing – and learning from – the *Institutes*' urgent concern with how internal conditions shape our perception of the external world.

Ultimately, the *Institutes* suggests that when humans fail to react to the world as it is – which, for Calvin, is so many overtures to filial relationship with God – this is not a case of passive misunderstanding but a matter of active self-delusion. Interpreted in its original milieu of visual

[114] Clark, *Vanities*, 6. [115] Clark, *Vanities*, 4 and 6, respectively.
[116] Clark, *Vanities*, 95.

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upheaval, the *Institutes* sounds a bracing call to interrogate how perception shapes what we confidently take as reality. If we can appreciate the way this text reflects and creatively intervenes in its own distinct – but not entirely unfamiliar – moment of perceptual uncertainty, we may find that Calvin has much to say to readers today. With its horror of the self-imposed blindness whereby we imprison ourselves in individual echo chambers, refusing new data and turning the world into a mirror of our own minds, the *Institutes* speaks powerfully in an era in which the ability to distinguish real from imagined, perceived from projected, is more salient than ever.

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