"Spectacular Sympathy- Visuality and Ideology in Dickens’s A Christmas Carol."

Jaffe discusses in her article the notion of A Christmas Carol as a "cultural text," one in which can be "rewritten to reflect particular cultural and historical circumstances" (255). A Christmas Carol serves as a tool of enculturation that exposes the reader/viewer to the predominant cultural values of the time. In this process of enculturation, the narrative follows a method of "linking visual representation to the production of individual sympathy and thus, ultimately to social harmony" (255). The reader simultaneously experiences Scrooge's experiences with the three Ghosts and identifies with him. In this vicarious viewing, both the reader and Scrooge desire these images, which represent cultural values, as Jaffe argues "[it] reinforces the desirability of a series of culturally valorized images and contributes to a sense that nothing exists-- at least, nothing worth looking at--outside those images" (256). The particular Victorian images that Jaffe describes are the "...dominant values of youth, boyhood fellowship, heterosexual desire, familial pleasure..." (257).

Another interesting view is Jaffe's discussion of how Scrooge learns his "lessons" quickly. For Jaffe, Scrooge learns his "lesson" of self-improvement because "...what is represented as learning in fact demonstrates that in his heart he knows them already" (259). Scrooge's easy transformation into charitable, genial friend/Uncle/Employer occur because he once embodied these positive qualities. Because, as Jaffe indicates, the reader identifies with Scrooge on his experience, the reader is able to easily transform as well because it is "...the recovery of knowledge the reader once possessed" (259).

Less compelling is Jaffe's discussion of Scrooge's pursuit of desirable images as the pursuit of "commodity culture." However, readers will find intrigue in her discussion of the reader's vicarious identification with Scrooge, and how identifying with a visual image can create both a personal reaction, as well as sympathy with others.