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How Navigators Think: The Death of Captain Cook Revisited

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For the best part of a century anthropologists have been forced to consider ‘how natives think’. By the time Marshall Sahlins used that phrase as the title of his book on the death of Captain James Cook at Hawaii, the problem had become equally familiar to historians.¹ Yet when attention has turned

from 'natives' to the navigators, it has been not how they think but how they see that has thrown up some of the richest historiography in recent decades. Rough sketches, field studies and finished paintings have been decoded to unveil the visual new world created by the first Europeans to coax their rickety ships into the Pacific Ocean.² But there is a more everyday history that in large part still remains to be told, concerned less with how than with what navigators see.

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