Dear Professor Lukasik,

Thank you for the opportunity to review your proposal for a book that promises to be very stimulating and to offer new approaches to the pictorial element in American literature. What I have read of it is very succinctly written, packed with insight, challenging to assumptions, and stylistically appealing. I would be surprised if leading academic publishers do not see that too.

You indicate a preference for first pitching the book to University of Chicago Press (UCP) and, having read its submission guidelines, I would make the following observations on the draft material you have compiled.

* If submitting by email, UCP suggests that your “letter of introduction” forms the body of your email “so that we can read the basic information about you and your project without opening an attachment”. It seems UCP see this as a key first impression, however submitted. In this context, I would recommend against reusing passages from your prospectus in your cover letter. It would be best to present your research as concisely as possible and to highlight your positive contribution to a new framework for studying the relation between image and text.
* Your draft of this letter rightly highlights the way your book will feed into multiple disciplines, recasts the relation between technology and culture and has great relevance to contemporary culture in the ubiquity of the image. These are key points, but I think you can go further and be more concrete—accepting that you also rightly want to make this a one-pager—in very briefly indicating your arguments more concretely. If I read them correctly, some of these are: (a) that the notion of ‘illustration’ changed in a particular direction over the period you are examining, as you substantiate with data (b) the related notion that image simply serves text is problematized by the evidence you uncover and (c) that the notion that technology simply drives culture is shown to be a one-sided understanding by the evidence you adduce. Of course, your case studies develop the ideas set out further. Nonetheless, I suggest being a little more specific and concrete at this juncture as there may otherwise be a danger of being perceived to only assert its unique challenge to existing arguments. And, of course, it needs to be reformulated rather than copy-pasted from the prospectus.
* On balance, I would suggest submitting Chapter 1 rather than 5 as a sample chapter. UCP indicates that it only wants one sample chapter initially. At first, I saw the value of submitting 5 as an example of how you explore a particular case study in depth, and on an important topic. That said, I feel Chapter 1 will give a better sense to the reviewer of what is new, challenging and “relevant” about the work thematically and in the broadest way.
* You make reference in the ‘letter of introduction,’ and your proposal/chapter outlines to recent studies in psychology and that your book relates to a number of fields of literature, history and so on. It would be worth giving a few examples of such works, even if briefly. In relation to psychology, for example, are you thinking of work by Paivio, Baddeley et al.? Which works on intermediality do you draw on or present a challenge to? UCP’s submission guidelines suggest you give “an account of your book’s relationship to comparable or competing works” and I take this as UCP wanting you to name names. Thus, for example, in the last paragraph of your proposal that comes before the chapter outlines, it would be worth pointing to examples of specific works in the fields you allude to.
* In both your letter of introduction and the proposal itself, I think it would be better to be more explicit about the relation of your Part 2 case studies to the more general theses of the book. Thus, if you can outline how these case studies serve or otherwise relate to the more general theses even more explicitly (as well as their having their own importance, of course), it will leave the reviewer in no doubt. This can be economically done, I am sure, but I think it will serve to reinforce how the book is a coherent whole for the reader and, more importantly here, for the reviewer.
* You mention the concepts of “verbal images” and “literary illustrations” quite a few times in your abstract and chapters outline. A potential publisher might ask themselves: what is the difference between a “verbal image” and literary description, if there is one? Does it apply to all descriptive language in general or specific instances? If so what are the criteria that define it?
* I read the draft of Chapter 5 with great interest. One question that occurred to me is: if you use the term “white male gaze”, will you pursue the “male” aspect of this? You clearly address the “white” aspect, and this study will, of course, be of great interest as much to contemporary debate as historical studies in that regard. However, having chosen that term—and it has great resonance of course and the white and the male were/are intertwined—will you address sexualized as well as racialized notions? Perhaps you already have a plan to address this and/or to acknowledge that it is beyond the scope/feasibility of this work.
* As it is presented in the abstract and the chapter outlines, the logic behind the division of the book into two parts is slightly hazy. Is it simply a chronological divide? A thematic one? A change in methodological approaches? I would suggest sharpening the distinction between them.
* Although UCP suggests it is not prescriptive about what should go into a book proposal, I believe you have covered the areas of accessible overview, concise chapter-by-chapter summary and the practical details as to length, state of play in drafting, number of illustrations and so on that it indicates as likely to appear. I would suggest, as already stated, that you flesh out a little more the book’s relationship to “comparable and competing works” but also “your assessment of the book’s audience”. On this latter point, you rightly highlight that there are research areas in many academic fields that would intersect, but are you able to point to key research nodes you know to be in place/developing where there would be an audience more specifically? This might serve to bring home the fact that this is a thriving area of study. In addition, it would be good to indicate to what extent the work could reach a “lay” audience.
* Overall, UCP suggest a submission of 5-10 pages (excluding your CV/resumé). I am aware too that I have suggested mainly adding detail, but you could probably achieve that while staying within the limit, though no doubt it is better to be nearer five than ten pages. In my specific comments on the proposal/chapter outlines, I suggest areas where you could perhaps be briefer if length becomes a problem.
* The proposal could do with some light editing beyond what I have already corrected.
* I have no comments on your CV, it seems properly formatted and very detailed.

I hope you find these comments helpful and I wish you every success with the book’s publication.