
Yohei Igarashi

University of Connecticut

The immersive “virtual reality” of a Wordsworth lyric, pre-Braille print culture for the blind, photographic montages, piano-telegraph-typewriter hybrid interfaces, *fin-de-siècle* Coventry Street’s titillating media attractions: such objects, among others, are attentively considered in Colette Colligan and Margaret Linley’s illuminating recent collection, *Media, Technology, and Literature in the Nineteenth Century*. To borrow a phrase from Helen Groth’s contribution on George Sims’s *Social Kaleidoscope* (1881), one might say that Colligan and Linley’s collection provides readers with kaleidoscopically shifting perspectives from one chapter to the next, “turning … now this way and now that” (92) the keywords listed in the volume’s title.

Colligan and Linley’s introductory essay offers some sense of the inter- or non-relations of these changing terms during the century in question, but they focus more tightly and expertly on one of the terms, “media,” and its interplay with “the ratio of senses” (239), in Christopher Keep’s McLuhanesque phrase. “Literature” or its relation to the other two terms, for instance, receives relatively scant attention in their introduction, an observation I make not in the elegiac-belletristic vein but as notice that in the introduction, as in the volume as a whole, the collection’s title is more umbrella than through-line. Still, with a fusion of material cultural
studies and media archaeology as the predominant methodology, the volume is especially sharp on how “new and complex relationships to the human sensorium developed alongside media’s coming of age, calling for a reconceptualization of the human body” (3). Throughout their introduction, the co-editors repeat their largest thesis, that “what the term media obscures is media history” (1), a provocative claim worth revisiting after a consideration of the collection they have curated.

The essays are distributed across sections titled “Image,” “Touch,” and “Sound.” But the co-editors, aligning themselves with recent studies on sound and touch in the Victorian era, are particularly interested in challenging the “visual hegemony” (10) of nineteenth-century media as well as the “ocular-centric bias” (9) of nineteenth-century studies, and this ambition is most fully realized in the volume’s investment in haptic matters. One might recall, in this connection, Walter Benjamin’s memorable statement in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” that “the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation alone … [t]hey are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation.” A full five of the eleven contributions, including some from the “Image” and “Sound” sections, can be grouped together as an exchange about “the guidance of tactile appropriation” in the nineteenth century. How did tactility adjust and guide the sensorium’s uneasy adjustment to “the emergence of media ubiquity” (2)?

Two essays look specifically to reading and writing by fingers, and jointly posit an “earlier ‘digital revolution’” (160). Vanessa Warne documents how a late eighteenth-century French “inkless” (46) embossing technique sparked the invention of several competing alphabets for books for the blind in Britain. Yet because sighted educators favored “the minimization of
distinctions between reading by touch and reading by sight” (56), and thus endorsed an embossed version of the familiar Roman alphabet, they retarded the installation of a non-Roman universal script system most suitable for finger reading— i.e., Braille— until the century’s end. The passing mention of a set of pin-pricking stamps used by blind children for writing (49) aroused my curiosity about the compositional side of literacy in this context, but Warne’s fascinating chapter covers a great deal of research as it is. Ivan Raykoff’s contribution is devoted to the transmission rather than reception of information by the fingers. Informed by Friedrich Kittler’s *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Raykoff surveys early telegraphs and typewriters with piano keyboards as their interface; the short-lived borrowings among these chimeric “technologies of the fingers” (160) tell of the entangled histories of artistic and mechanical instruments.

Warne’s and Raykoff’s essays are enriched by David P. Parisi’s discursive but informative contribution on the significance of Ernst Heinrich Weber’s tactile perception experiments (which lead to the subfield of experimental psychology given the name “haptics” in the 1890s). In retrospect, sighted educators’ inadequate understanding of blind reading, as recounted by Warne, seems attributable not only to their assimilationist leanings, but also to the fact that blind educational discourse ran closely parallel to, but was slow to incorporate into the design of its pedagogical media, the experimental methods and insights of the science of touch. Likewise, as Parisi points out, Weber’s important experiments would eventually make him grandfather of today’s “touch-based human-computer interfaces” (195), but the British and American telegraph and typewriter makers catalogued by Raykoff appear to have cycled hurriedly through various keyboards in blithe independence of the coextensive psychophysiology of touch with implications for interface design. The volume suggests many such stories of
difficult or failed mediations between discourses, and the ever-growing heap of discarded media, codes, practices, and devices that are their byproduct.

The polemical strain of Parisi’s argument is, in turn, countered by Colette Colligan’s and Christopher Keep’s essays. Parisi is intent to show that, contrary to characterizations of touch as “the ground for an anti-modern or anti-ocular politics” (192), touch is in fact “the product of the experimental scientist’s lab, a space quintessentially modern in its composition” (192), and implicated accordingly in “modern regimes of perception” (193). Yet Colligan and Keep point toward a more pliant conception of what Parisi calls “tactile modernity” (189). Colligan identifies in the pornographic novel *Teleny* (1893; 1934) an anti-modern, anti-ocular, and “anti-technological sensuality” (231) of touch that permeates not only the novel’s thematics, but also its “collaborative queer authorship” (216) by several hands (possibly including Oscar Wilde’s) and its distribution through the clandestine book trade. This essay is remarkable, particularly in its first half. There, Colligan, with a nod to Franco Moretti’s literary maps, engages in what she calls “media geography,” and produces a series of assiduous reconstructions: of Coventry Street, then the Piccadilly-Soho neighborhood more widely, and eventually the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris. By a kindred argument, Keep explains that nineteenth-century telegraphy’s trend toward hearing and touch over vision (i.e., the transition from optical to electrical telegraphy, the adoption of the Morse “sounder” which exercised telegraph operators’ ears more than eyes) reinscribed longstanding associations of femininity with the haptic, the acoustic, nervous sensitivity, and sympathetic communication. Keep’s astute piece, along with the other essays on touch, recover the manual habits that guided and grated against the scopic dimensions of reading, writing, typing, sending, and receiving information in the nineteenth century.
The other six essays in the volume form something of a bloc of their own. They examine how writers in “an age of media explosions” (3) managed print’s potential for sensory “austerity” (34) and richness—its capacity for hallucination and hypnosis, immediacy and hypermediacy—and more broadly, how literary media engaged in processes of “remediation … adaptation, mutation, incorporation, and disruption” (1) with other media. (Colligan’s essay overlaps with this grouping of essays.) By Richard Menke’s stellar reading, Wordsworth’s “I wandered lonely as a Cloud” (1807), in its attempts at virtual-reality effects, answers to the media ecology of its moment. Effacing the activity of writing (chiefly Dorothy’s journal entry that originally commemorated the same scene) and likening memory to a retinal afterimage (the “ocular spectrum” mentioned in the 1815 version’s note), Wordsworth presents the human memory as “a medium for virtual perception and experience liberated from the constraints of time and place” (24) on par with the immersive aspirations of other media. Later in the century, for the social reformer George Sims, it was the kaleidoscope (invented in 1815) that served as a model for his reportage on fin-de-siècle urban life. As Helen Groth nicely puts it in her brief essay, kaleidoscopic writing captures “the way the eye moves in and out of focus as random details of faces and objects pass by and the mind struggles to make meaning out of the sensual inundation of life in a modern metropolis” (92). Where Menke and Groth focus on the visual effects of print, Lorraine Janzen Kooistra and Linda K. Hughes examine the ways that print accommodated sound. Kooistra studies wood-engraved Christmas gift books of the 1870s that, featuring lyrics, musical scores, and illustrations, made poetry a multisensory affair of song and images, and a “shared sensuous experience” (133) for families. Hughes shows, in a complementary piece, how midcentury visual and poetic depictions of music treat the shifting hierarchy among poetry,
painting, and music, and acknowledge the musical medium's rising prestige due to the Romantic elevation of music, the notion of *ut pictura musica*, and aestheticism.

Finally, there is a pair of essays invested not in how other sensory media impinged on nineteenth-century literary media, but how literary modes and figures circulated in the media ecology. Daniel A. Novak begins his essay by asking, “What would it mean for photography … to act as a form of literary narrative?” *Pace* some twentieth-century theories of the photograph’s indexical and non-narrative qualities, Victorians engaged in the cutting-and-pasting practice of “composition photography” (71) and created portraits, caricatures, and family albums with the imaginative, narrative, combinatory traits of literature. (Novak’s chapter benefits from the accompaniment of these montages and collages, the volume’s coolest group of images.)

Margaret Linley, for her part, traces how Frankenstein’s creature becomes an ambulatory topos in the 1830s, spilling out of Mary Shelley’s novel and into horse-racing and animal husbandry discourse, as well as political caricatures about cholera and the Reform Act of 1832. Throughout, she is alert to the “connections between the creation of life, media, and the reproducible body” (258).

So, what to make of the co-editors’ main claim? They offer several, but not quite identical, versions of it in their introduction: “what the term media obscures is media history” (1); “the erasure of the complex and multiple media histories from the concept of media is inherent to media logic” (2); “the logic of media … is to erase its historical origins and ignore the complex multi-media facets of its history” (9). These contentions are braced by a historical narrative: “Media emerged in the early twentieth century as a modern myth …[.] The moment of consolidation of the nineteenth-century multiplicity of media into a totality of unique singularity in the early twentieth century thus marks the simultaneous appropriation and disavowal of media
history, the spatial incorporation of the historical many into the one true media” (1-2). Such claims may initially cause difficulties for readers, I think, and for three reasons. First, the claims fudge on their subject—“media,” “the term media,” or “the logic of media”?—and run counter to what some of the volume’s essays suggest. Menke, for instance, writes that “William erases any trace of sisterly archive” (28); here, at least, erasure is performed not by Will-of-Medium, but William. Secondly, these claims appear to forgo the double-edged nature of remediation (media obscure, but they also retain traces of past media, and thereby some aspects of media history), and abjure the notion that history (including media history) is only stored, transmitted, or accessible through media of one sort of another, in favor of a more forceful phrasing that media only darken their past. Yet many of the contributions describe how specific media artifacts—a lyric poem, a pornographic novel, a painting—register media transition, and bequeath to us some sense of media’s “complex relationships to the human sensorium.” Finally, the co-editors’ historical narrative about media consolidation oversimplifies somewhat. What looks like media’s appropriative and obfuscatory logic might better be thought of as only an “afterimage” (to borrow from Wordsworth) of a complex historical sequence, one version of which would include: the concentration of mass media (whether state-sponsored as in the case of the BBC, or via corporate consolidation as in the formation of NBC), a resultant societal sense of a unified media, and finally a corresponding change in how individuals and organizations (not least those of “the media”) refer to and perceive “media,” which is in time recorded in the OED as a new usage. In other words, the logic of erasure and consolidation seems less an “inherent” drive of media, and more a function of corporate merger and acquisition.

I would guess that the introduction’s theses resulted from the grafting of the emergence of the consolidated definition of the media onto the co-editors’ conviction that the rich histories
of nineteenth-century media are often forgotten and worth recovering—hence, their formulation that “the term media … obscures media history.” But once the spirit, rather than the letter, of the co-editors’ claims is recognized, one understands their commitment to media-archaeological recovery. I am certain that this illuminating collection will be of value to scholars of nineteenth-century literature and media. Indeed, it can be considered a sequel of sorts to Clifford Siskin and William Warner’s 2010 *This Is Enlightenment*, a companion volume to Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree’s 2003 *New Media, 1740–1915* (a stated influence), and a prequel to several studies on modernity and media. Above all, the volume should leave readers with an excellent understanding of Victorian interfaces, and a sense that the effects and future fates of media are just as obscure for their contemporaneous users (whether the Victorians or us) as media’s pasts are for media historians looking back.

**Biographical Notice**

Yohei Igarashi is Assistant Professor of Poetics at University of Connecticut and is at work on a book entitled “The Poetry Channel,” which explores how British Romantic poets imagined the transmission of poetry through history and space.