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Consuming Ephemera

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CONSUMING EPHEMERA Richard Salmon

The Mediated Mind: Affect, Ephemera, and Consumerism in the Nineteenth Century by Susan Zieger. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018. 273 pp. Hardcover \$105.00, paper \$30.00.

Through the large-scale digital archives curated by museums, libraries, and commercial publishers within the last two decades, Victorian print ephemera has become more visible than at any time since the end of the nineteenth century. Rather than sinking further into oblivion, ephemeral printed matter such as newspapers, advertisements, and postcards has become increasingly accessible as a resource for academic study, public engagement, and even popular cultural recycling. Moreover, the paradoxical preservation of nineteenth-century print ephemera in seemingly permanent twenty-first-century digital formats has the potential to highlight similarities between the popular media of both periods. Literary critics and cultural historians have shown how many of the practices and technologies associated with our own media era—a preoccupation with celebrity and brand identity, disembodied communication across time and space—originated in the nineteenth century. Susan Zieger’s *The Mediated Mind* builds on this recent body of critical work on media history, making the central focus of her argument the claim “that nineteenth-century habits of mass print consumption prefigure our own digital moments” (7). Examining mass-cultural formations of the past, she suggests, helps us to understand better our current digital media

environment, and may even lead to the reassuring conclusion that “we have seen it all before” (213). The parallels that Zieger draws between print and digital media are suggestive and compelling, though the precise nature of their historical relationship is not fully developed: if, for example, some features of nineteenth-century mass media appear to “prefigure” their twenty-first-century equivalent, is this because the present enables us to construe the past teleologically?

Though, in her Introduction and brief Conclusion, Zieger foregrounds the contemporary resonance and “urgency” of this topic, the five intervening chapters provide detailed explorations of Victorian print culture, with particular attention given to the “pivotal decade” of the 1890s (14). The distinctive and unifying focus of the book lies in its attention to “scenes of ephemeral media consumption” within the nineteenth century (3), which anticipate or parallel later cultural phenomena, rather than developing a sustained comparison between the two media systems. The first chapter examines the mid-nineteenth-century temperance movement as a foundational instance of the mass-mediation of live events through printed ephemera. Though an “improbable origin of mass culture, the temperance movement nonetheless

expressed a dialectic central to it, between printed objects”—such as the widely circulated temperance tracts and pledge cards—“and live, mass experience”—the collective gatherings organized by charismatic speakers (24). While the temperance movement officially promoted an “aesthetics of sobriety” (25), both its live events and accompanying print ephemera functioned as substitute objects of “addictive” consumption. The longstanding cultural anxiety about the supposedly addictive properties of mass culture is one of Zieger’s recurring themes and features more centrally in a chapter on “information addiction,” which reads Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories for *The Strand Magazine* alongside an extensive body of contemporary print ephemera associated with the practice of tobacco smoking. Zieger convincingly demonstrates that smoking was a pervasive “metonym and metaphor for print consumption” during the nineteenth century that reaches its apogee in the figure of Holmes, an iconic smoker, consumer of print culture and information addict (55). The desire to consume and store information is, of course, key to the narrative genre of detective fiction, which famously twins the figure of the detective with the reader. Zieger proceeds to connect this affective, embodied form of reading to the late nineteenth- and

early twentieth-century popular cultural practice of collecting cigarette cards—the first instance, she contends, of print ephemera produced in order to be collected.

Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) is used to similar effect as an example of longer form detective (or Sensation) fiction in chapter 3, which fascinatingly explores the significance of ink as a material medium of print technology. Arguing that “ink is a crucial, undertheorized element of media history” (105), Zieger ranges from literary representations of aberrant uses of ink by “new social actors” (95), not fully assimilated to mechanized print literacy, to its use as a “screen” or “visual technology,” evident in Collins's treatment of ink-gazing, an esoteric practice associated by Victorians with non-European cultures (101). *The Moonstone* illustrates a mid-Victorian conception of the unconscious mind as a repository for forgotten sense impressions (an information storage site that to later eyes resembles a digital media file), which can be accessed through various seemingly nonrational techniques, ink-gazing being one. At the end of the century, however, the creative use of the inkblot was developed as a diagnostic tool for modern psychologists in the form of the Rorschach test. Chapter 4 explores the cognate idea that new media technologies enabled late

nineteenth-century consumers not only to store knowledge and experiences within the mind but also to repeat them in a form analogous to digital “playback.” George Du Maurier's novel *Peter Ibbetson* (1891) presents a playful fantasy on the possibility of “convert[ing] embodied experience into bodiless information” (131): the title character replays past personal experience and shared memories while in the unconscious state of “dreaming true,” a phenomenon which likens the capacity of the mind to photography and the phonograph. As with Collins, Du Maurier's model of the unconscious is pre-Freudian, a site of information storage that lends itself to “flat” rather than “deep” characterization, in keeping with his better-known career as a visual caricaturist. The final scene of media consumption considered by Zieger is that of self-fashioning through mass culture: Is it possible for individuals to realize an authentic self within a world of already mediated cultural objects? In a sustained reading of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890–1), Zieger argues that Dorian's “intoxication” with the yellow book (modelled on Huysmans's decadent novel *A Rebours/Against Nature*) embodies a state of “reverie” that “evokes the ambivalence of the modern media consumer, compelled to sort through and try on

an array of personalities" (168). Drawing on the work of Regenia Gagnier (among others), Zieger shows that Wilde's posture of adherence to high art is deceptive, since it is often mediated by familiarity with "middlebrow" cultural sources, and indeed by his deconstruction of notions of authenticity and originality. The Wildean dandy, she concludes, "embodies the dilemma of personality in a mass-mediated age" (192): the only possibility of finding oneself is through embracing the multiplicity of potential selves offered by print media.

Zieger presents her analysis of mass culture and media consumption as a critique of, and refinement on, earlier critical approaches, most notably Frankfurt School Marxism and the work of Friedrich Kittler. Though productively engaged with Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), she dismisses Marxist depictions of the manipulation of a "mindless mass-cultural consumer" (12). Central to this move is the application of affect theory (as developed in the work of Kathleen Stewart, Eve Sedgwick, and Teresa Brennan) to media reception, which Zieger distinguishes both from passive consumption, on the one hand, and rational self-reflection on the other. "Acknowledging the mediated mind," she insists, "obliges us to give

up the illusory association between individual sovereignty, reason, and agency" (8). Affect can be experienced within collective sites of consumption, but this does not mean that the experience of the "mass" audience is homogenized, as in early theories of crowd psychology. While this approach offers a more nuanced and sympathetic account of mass cultural consumption than some earlier critiques, its claim to straightforwardly supersede them is open to question. Frankfurt School readings of mass culture, it could be argued, oversimplify its manipulative effect on consumers because of the critic's attention to the systemic production mechanisms of the "culture industry," whereas Zieger's account is not primarily concerned with how or why Victorian print ephemera was produced (the motivations of tobacco companies, for example). On the one hand, the commodifying imperative of capitalist production is taken as given, while on the other hand, the notion of a rational act of consumption is equated with an "egoistic" self, in contrast to the "shared emotional, embodied intensity" of affective experience (37). This results in a valuable but necessarily limited study of mass culture and mass media, if we understand these terms not simply from the perspective of consumers.

One wonders also how Zieger's sympathetic account of the consumption of Victorian print

ephemera might be affected by the selection of more recalcitrant literary examples from the period. Zieger acknowledges, in passing, the broad nineteenth-century tradition of cultural criticism directed against the machine-driven technologies of mass culture, but doesn't consider specific figures in detail. Would a novel by George Gissing, for example, support this account in the same way as texts by Wilde and Conan Doyle, or would his more obvious suspicion of the consuming "masses" present a different challenge for the critic? This is not to suggest that a different selection of primary material would make for a more significant or persuasive study, and it may well have made for a less focussed one. The question may, however, indicate that the book offers a less comprehensive and, to

some extent, less radical account of nineteenth-century responses to mass culture than its broadly theorized argument appears to suggest. While explicitly aiming to recuperate the vast corpus of nineteenth-century print ephemera, *The Mediated Mind* remains more reliant on a selective use of canonical literary texts as supporting evidence than might have been expected. Within these parameters, though, it offers an impressively researched and illuminating critical genealogy of current features of mass-media culture.

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