

Susan Zieger, **The Mediated Mind: Affect, Ephemera, and Consumerism in the Nineteenth Century**, New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2018, 273 pp., \$30.00 (paperback).

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What links a cigarette card to a Google search? Ink to an iPhone? Social media to the stories of Sherlock Holmes? These all are (or were) materials of mediation that cultivate a relationship among human beings through the media that they consume, each with its own engendered affect that results from engagement with its materiality. Contemporary popular discourse often argues that the possibility of authentic experience has been eroded due to a cultural overreliance on screens to mediate human connection and furthermore that this mass mediation is new and unprecedented in human history. But in ***The Mediated Mind: Affect, Ephemera, and Consumerism in the Nineteenth Century***, author Susan Zieger takes a polemical stance against both these positions, arguing that the roots of our 21st-century anxieties can be traced to the explosion of cheap, ephemeral print media in 19th-century Britain.



Scholars who are familiar with the works of communications history such as Kittler’s *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1999) and Sterne’s *The Audible Past* (2003) will instantly recognize Zieger’s project: to accomplish for print media what the aforementioned scholars did for visual and auditory media. That is to say, Zieger locates print media as the affective locus of 19th-century everyday life, urging the reader to take seriously the psychic consequences of the proliferation of temperance pamphlets, newspapers, cigarette cards, dime novels, and more.

Her focus on affect is what differentiates this approach to media from the work of other recent thinkers on the topic. For Zieger, affect “links emotion to cognition, self to other, and self to environment” (p. 8) and in this way becomes useful for thinking through the ephemera of daily lived experience. Through an attention to affect, she reveals the distribution of agency among bodies and objects, forcing the reader to consider how technologies cultivate the very manner in which humans conceive of themselves within society. Along the way, Zieger rebuffs the “mystifications” (p. 208) of those in the Marxist tradition such as Walter Benjamin, arguing that far from being lost in modernity, the aura of a work arises in concert with its mechanical reproducibility. In essence, before there is a copy, there cannot exist an original. And as for Kittler, his Lacanian structuralism is rejected in favor of an ethos that reframes the consumer in an active manner. Here, the consumer is bestowed with a “porous agency” (p. 178), which makes allowances for individualized authenticity.

Zieger displays an admirable candor when wrestling with these giants of the field, maintaining an air of optimistic ambivalence rather than outright pessimism. This ambivalence arises as a theme throughout *The Mediated Mind* as a mode of reckoning with such lofty prospects as the mediated construction of

personality in a mass culture. Zieger shies away from easy accusations of false consciousness with regard to her historical subjects; ambivalently, her actors both *act within* and are *acted upon* by their mediated environments, producing novel configurations of sociality and personality that cannot wholly be labeled as authentic or inauthentic.

Regarding the contents of the book itself, *The Mediated Mind* is broken up into five chapters, each of which proposes to address a distinct scene in the history of print-media consumption. The first three chapters are the most successful in this endeavor, while the final two function more as literary criticism and do not offer as much in the way of insight into everyday life in the 19th century.

In the first, Zieger examines the "aesthetics of sobriety" (p. 26) that were mobilized by temperance tracts in the early 1800s. Here, she is most interested in the collective affect and performativity of live temperance events, showcases of mediated personality that grew beyond their immediate social bounds to affect others throughout the country. She focuses on the popular lectures of teetotaler John Bartholomew Gough, who at once cultivated a machine-like personage through his references to himself as an "appliance" as well as a hyperreal sincerity that endeared him to his audiences. In this way, Zieger shows how the ephemeral lectures and pamphlets of the temperance movement set the stage for the mediation of identity through print media that would come to characterize the remainder of the century.

Chapter 2, the highlight of the work, relocates the present-day figure of the information addict to the pages of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. Here, Zieger deftly blends excerpts from Doyle's works with her own evocative prose while also foregrounding the popular habits of reading that drove the consumption of these stories. "Consumption" here is highly intentional diction; Zieger identifies the leisure activity of smoking as a productive metaphor for the act of reading, in that both consume and imbibe something ephemeral, and both activities rhetorically construe the actor as the potential addict. She traces the genealogy of smoking as a marker of genius through stories and artworks that represent thought processes as manifesting physically as smoky apparitions. Furthermore, through an examination of the trivia presented on collectible cigarette cards, Zieger shows how the modern obsession with trivial, ephemeral facticity was inculcated by a product of mass consumption. The encyclopedic knowledge of the information addict (just as arbitrarily organized as the encyclopedia itself) thus stands as a potent metaphor for the increasing mediatization via print experienced in the 19th century: Thinking becomes smoking becomes reading becomes being read.

Chapter 3 moves into the realm of the unconscious, via the medium of ink. Zieger's treatment of the unconscious here is a discursive one; that is to say, she is more interested in how it has been thought than how it has "really" manifested. She calls ink "a crucial, undertheorized element of media history" (p. 105) and aims to rectify that second characteristic in this intervention. This is accomplished through an engaging journey into the practices of Rorschach tests and the lesser-known one of ink gazing, in which ink becomes a screen apt for scrying. In this way, Zieger plays on the multiple valences of ink as "medium," asking the reader to consider how ink was mobilized to uncover the unconsciousness of subjects in mystical ways that did not involve writing. This chapter, more so than others, also does an admirable job of addressing the orientalist undertones to much of the mass cultural practices going on in Britain at this time.

Rather than dedicating a chapter to this issue, Zieger deftly weaves this commentary throughout the book, but it is foregrounded here.

Finally, chapters 4 and 5 depart from the earlier organization; instead, each examines a literary work that addresses anxieties around personal connection and authenticity. These are works of George Du Maurier and Oscar Wilde, principally focused on their respective novels *Peter Ibbetson* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. As mentioned earlier in this review, these two chapters are a somewhat stark departure from Zieger's other work; the reader receives little sense of how these novels impacted the lifeworlds of their everyday readers, as the focus is sharply on the intricacies of the novels themselves. There is nothing objectionable about this *per se*, but a reader drawn to *The Mediated Mind* as a work of communications history may find their experience with the latter half of the book wanting, especially if they have only minor familiarity with these authors. Here, Zieger conjures affective nuance through a close reading of two novels, rather than demonstrating their affective effervescence in the realm of the mass cultural consumer. Even so, the chapters contain valuable insights on how the authors reckoned with big ideas of *zeitgeist*, such as the brain as a storage device, or the role and meaning of *reverie* in society.

To conclude, any scholars looking to widen their understanding of Western 19th-century mass culture would do well to examine *The Mediated Mind*. The book, especially the first three chapters, is an appropriate addition to undergraduate or graduate courses on topics ranging from communications history to affect theory. Literary theorists and historians will gravitate toward the second half, which goes much deeper into close analysis, but Zieger grounds her first three chapters in other well-known works such that the book as a whole would also fit suitably into a course on European literature. By firmly situating herself within the recent scholarly tradition of affect studies, Zieger brings a fresh perspective to the little-known ephemera that set the stage for our current mediated moment.

References

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