

Photography and Other Media in the Nineteenth Century

Edited by Nicoletta Leonardi and Simone Natale. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018. 256 pp. Hardcover. \$94.95. ISBN 978-0-271079-15-8.

Visual culture references in the academy have become as pervasive as emojis in texts. Nineteenth-century visual culture in particular is instructive, as it was embedded in a technological explosion comparable to the digital age.

Historical photography is a frequently consulted nineteenth-century visual form because the medium was then new, socially dynamic, and uniquely aesthetic. Simultaneous with this trend, the formal canon of fine art photography, determined by major museums like the National Gallery, has expanded to include the “vernacular”—everyday snapshots, anonymous studio portraiture, and family photo albums. The last decade has seen a number of significant projects based on vernacular photographs, including documentary films, history publications, web-based mapping, digital humanities projects, and museum exhibits. As an expanding circle of scholarship from a broadening range of fields taps into the history of photography, intersections with other contemporary media forms also become crucial points of learning.

All this makes it a particularly interesting moment to be an archivist or curator at a historical collection with significant photographic holdings. Comparative studies are best done where the critical masses of multiple media are located, often at archives and libraries. How we describe and provide access to our archival materials ideally should anticipate intersecting interests and new research questions. Thus, curators or archivists benefit from staying on top of the current thinking in visual culture. *Photography and Other Media in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Nicoletta Leonardi and Simone Natale, provides fresh insights for the expanding potential of archival visual collections.

A cast of fourteen writers in media studies, visual culture, and the history of photography join the editors, who coauthor the introduction and outline the volume’s themes. Leonardi (PhD, University College London) is professor of art history at Turin’s Academy of Fine Arts and visiting professor at the University of California, Florence Study Center. Her research examines images and technology in nineteenth-century US landscape culture, precinema immersive viewing, and the definition and meaning of modernity in Italian postwar urban planning and photography. She has been published in a wide range of journals, compilations, and catalogs. Natale (PhD, University of Turin) is lecturer in communication and media studies, Loughborough University. An authority on historical media and communication studies, including digital, Natale is the author of a monograph, *Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism and the*

Rise of Modern Media Culture (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), and of articles published in numerous peer-reviewed journals.

The contributors to this volume include Geoffrey Batchen, Geoffrey Belknap, Lynn Berger, Jan von Brevér, Anthony Enns, André Gaudreault, Lisa Gitelman, David M. Henkin, Erkki Huhtamo, Philippe Marion, Peppino Ortoleva, Steffen Siegel, Richard Taws, and Kim Timby. This group includes new-to-the-field voices as well as established authorities. The acknowledgments thank several notable scholars in the media and photographic history fields.

What these essays have in common is an approach from outside the traditional history of photography. The dominant view here is that photography, which emerged from nineteenth-century science and art, quickly meshed with publishing, communication systems, and electrical engineering, yet has since been isolated in a bubble of “media exceptionalism.” This volume makes a case for the self-described “interdisciplinary encounter” (acknowledgments) of historical photography as a media of communication vitally intertwined with others.

Aimed primarily at art historians specializing in photography, the scope and style of the thirteen essays, introduction, and afterword are also readable and accessible by a broader audience. The essays are divided into three parts: “The Emergence of Modern Communications,” “Technologies of Reproduction,” and “Popular Cultures.” The introduction by Nicoletta Leonardi and Simone Natale previews the contents, while the afterword by Geoffrey Batchen and Lisa Gitelman looks beyond with a conversation on the importance of context, the meaning of materiality in historical objects, and the evolution of museums and archives. The book’s 256 pages include an index, lists of illustrations and contributors, and an extensive bibliography of recent publications.

The black-and-white illustrations, forty in all, are an eclectic group of magazine cartoons, reproductions of photographs, early motion picture devices, images of mechanical telegraph equipment, plus portraits, landscapes, urban scenes, and other images. Anthony Enns’s choices of “Photographs of Vocal Sounds” taken from the *American Journal of Science*, are unlikely candidates for inclusion in any broad history of photography, but in his essay, are essential for making his point about transmedia recording processes. Taken on their own, the illustrations would comprise a befuddling assortment, but their diversity comes from the range of ideas presented.

Although the essays in *Photography and Other Media in the Nineteenth Century* are positioned from a narrow art history–media studies binary, they expand within that space to link to such topics as human-machine interaction, transportation and communication technologies, media and societal constructs, perception and reality, objectivity, recording the invisible, copyright law, art aesthetics, and others. Specific case studies include effects of juxtaposing photographs with text, as in Geoffrey Belknap’s chapter on scientific publications,

and the patent dispute over the widely used collodion processes in Lynn Berger's essay on how the photographic press shaped the Bromide patent dispute of the 1850s.

One also finds within the essays a broad theorizing on perception and reality in film versus still photography and the concept of humans progressively morphing into machines as cameras on tripods began to resemble people and vice versa. Less well-known technologies and historical incidents pop up regularly. Both American and European perspectives are represented within a Western history of photography.

Some of the topics are a bit esoteric (Anthony Enns on "Sound Photography") or represent photographic history in the service of cultural theory (André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion on "The Double-Birth Model Tested against Photography"). While the essays in this book certainly recognize the broad influence of nineteenth-century photography, the microfocus and speculative nature of some has the effect of reducing the potency of the broader argument. A little more grounding and empirical support would be welcome. Almost universally, the authors consider the materiality of the photograph as a link to understanding its consumption, mobility, and impact, as well as locating the boundaries of its interaction with other media.

Overall, *Photography and Other Media in the Nineteenth Century* is loaded with concepts worthy of long chapters or books of their own. However, many of these concepts are only tenuously linked into cohesive arguments. This is okay, as the stated purpose of this project is to fuel a larger conversation. Chapter 5, by coeditor Nicoletta Leonardi, "With Eyes of Flesh and Glass Eyes," gathers many of the most important advances of nineteenth-century American culture and technology (steam-powered transportation, Manifest Destiny, the rise of American landscape painting, photography) to back a case for the emergence of a human-machine consciousness running parallel to the invention of photography. Cartoons of anthropomorphic cameras and texts from talking trains add to the evidence of a cultural and existential merging of humans and machines. These references to *being* a machine are perhaps more amusing than enlightening and generally have more to do with literary and philosophical concepts than with visual culture. Although certainly a fascinating point (with a long history of its own), the case for this existential concept as a strong undercurrent of nineteenth-century viewing practices comes up short.

Photography and Other Media in the Nineteenth Century is a reassessment of the history of photography as media history. It is a forthright call for a structured, integrated, and empirical study, yet the book acknowledges its own limitations in achieving this goal. The essays make the case for understanding photographs as part of "dynamic relationships, not just static objects" and how nineteenth-century photographs traveled, were reproduced, and influenced social behavior (p.

212). The collection portrays a vision of the history of photography as a myriad of influences expanding on the power of media instead of an aesthetic evolution and histories of images and authors in isolation (p. 3).

The editors make clear that *Photography and Other Media in the Nineteenth Century* should be read “first and foremost as a call for further inquiries” (p. 9) and is certainly welcome and stimulating. The contextualization of nineteenth-century photography as media history is a reassessment consistent with the fragmentation of culture that we are experiencing in the digital era. This lively popcorn popper of ideas is instructive but lacks the gravitas of previous reassessments that relied more on a single vision. For example, consider the social history approach that began in the 1930s with Robert Taft’s *Photography and the American Scene* (Macmillan, 1938). Also among more focused studies is Van Deren Coke’s work on the direct interaction between photography and painting, *The Painter and the Photograph: from Delacroix to Warhol* (University of New Mexico Press, 1964).

As ambitious and thought-provoking as these essays are, they come up against some questions not easily answered: for example, how did photography, as a communications medium, so quickly become such a powerful social currency? Why wouldn’t photography deserve the status of “media exceptionalism” as its influence was most powerfully profound when consumed directly, unfiltered and undiluted by other media?

This publication raises points about the importance of cross-media context that are certainly well taken and should be reassuring to antiquarian collectors and archivists. The deep-dive immersion into oceans of material that is a unique experience for archivists and collectors is a great foundation to developing contextual understanding without dissolving appreciation for singular image aesthetics. Collectors and archivists frequently seek cross-media references to validate the content of their collections. This volume puts the academic art historical/archaeological world’s stamp authority on these practices.

Photography and Other Media in the Nineteenth Century is well timed as current economic, social, and technical realities have libraries, archives, and museums reconsidering their missions, restructuring their systems, and seeking new audiences. Archives are now featuring more public programming, and museums are contextualizing their art collections with displays of archival materials. Staying in step with contemporary thinking from media and art histories will be crucial to assessing how archives and libraries can better serve a new generation of scholars. After all, 180 years after we first saw ourselves in a photograph, we are still trying to figure out exactly what it means and how it happened.

© Clayton Lewis

William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan