Old Media and the Medieval Concept

reviewed by Michele Kennerly [iD]

Pennsylvania State University, mjk46@psu.edu

Thora Brylowe and Stephen Yeager, eds. *Old Media and the Medieval Concept: Media Ecologies before Early Modernity*. 280 pp., figs., index. Montréal: Concordia University Press, 2021. Open access download.

Antiquus. Medius. Modernus. "Before." "Middle." "Just now." Those three Latin adjectives underwrite the stubborn periodization schema by which the European past and studies of it tend to be sorted. They're more familiar, of course, as "the ancient," "the medieval," and "the modern."

Whereas *antiquus* and *modernus* were used as generational descriptors in ancient Roman rhetorical theory, "medieval," a concatenation of *media æva* (middle ages), comes to us courtesy of Francis Bacon. In his 1620 *Novum Organon* (both an homage and a challenge to the old one of Aristotle), Bacon used *media æva* to mark the ostensibly unremarkable cultural and chronological space between what, for him, were two self-evidently remarkable ones: (Athenian and Roman) antiquity and his own. We might not all be connected to Francis Bacon by six degrees socially,[1] but we are intellectually: His impatient attitude authorized an enduring dismissiveness about the Middle Ages. It is periodization's flyover country.

Evidence abounds for the Middle Ages being snubbed particularly egregiously in major studies of media history. Following the cosmic logic of Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy*,[2] the Middle Ages were but gas and dust. Following the framework of Friedrich Kittler's *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*,[3] the Middle Ages are far from the century across which the mediality of the literary was doing its most transformative cultural work. Following the genealogy of John Guillory's "The Genesis of the Media Concept,"[4] the Middle Ages merit a single footnote. All the while, medievalists were some of the earliest adopters of digital scholarly methods and platforms, and some of those spotlighted medieval media.

Those two slights of the Middle Ages—one born in the seventeenth century, the other in the twentieth—motivate *Old Media and the Medieval Concept*,

[1] "Francis Bacon Network [2, 1562-1626, 61-100%]," *Six Degrees of Francis Bacon*, accessed March 1, 2023, http://www.sixdegreesoffrancisbacon.com/?ids=10000473&min_confidence=60&type=network.

[2] Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

[3] Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

[4] John Guillory, "Genesis of the Media Concept," *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 2 (2010).

the inaugural volume in a series titled "Media Before 1800" (notice the allusion to Kittler), in whose campaign I have enlisted readers of this review already, using the rallying cries of the co-editors, romanticist Thora Brylowe and medievalist Stephen M. Yeager.

Medievalists have been writing sumptuously about medieval media for some time; what the medievalists in this volume do is explicitly engage the terms and assumptions of twentieth- and twenty-first-century media history and theory, and invite media theorists and historians, in turn, not to pass over the Middle Ages. The frontispiece, which peeks through a cut-out on the cover, is a medieval consanguinity diagram, and, dodging gross bloodline-talk, one might call it emblematic of the congruities between medieval studies and media studies that emerge when one translates Bacon's *media æva* as "the mediating ages," as the editors provocatively do.

The volume assumes a symmetrical structure of two parts of three chapters each. The first part, "Long Durations," contests the logic of periodization, which might permit analogies between and among periods but denies continuities. Brandon W. Hawk's chapter on "The Genesis of the Digital Concept" leads. "Digital" exploded onto the cultural scene about the same time as "information" (though neither appears among Raymond Williams's keywords), two members of the vocabulary of automated computation. Hawk deploys philological methods to track *digit*-based words across medieval Latin and English texts, demonstrating its use in mathematical contexts that could be called computational. Key to his chapter is medieval "finger reckoning," giving numerical purpose to fingers and hands to make abstract mathematical concepts more concrete. As he hits the end of his genealogy, I think Hawk under-reaches when he limits the computational use of digits (fingers) in our digital (not analogue) age to "typing and clicking with our fingers" on our gadgets (35, 50). The word-history he surfaces becomes even more compelling when one thinks of the hands that make the gadgets themselves, from the start of the digital age. For instance, Lisa Nakamura's work[5] highlights the Indigenous women hired by Fairchild Semiconductor to make circuits due to their "nimble fingers." There are also all the fingers of Google Books scanner-laborers that the company took pains to remove,[6] thereby ensuring invisible laborers[7] stayed that way.

Co-editor Stephen M. Yeager argues in his chapter, "Protocol and Regulation: Controlling Media Histories," that the control concepts of protocol and regulation map on generatively to prevailing attitudes toward the dominant media forms of pre-modern, modern, and post-modern historical periods, which themselves shape larger views about the character of those periods. Yeager's media examples are manuscripts, printed books, television, and the internet. He pairs

[5] Lisa Nakamura, "Indigenous Circuits," *Computer History Museum* (blog), January 2, 2014, https://computerhistory.org/blog/indigenous-circuits/.

[6] Asher Moses, "Book Scans Reveal Google's Handiwork," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 7, 2007, https://www.smh.com.au/technology/book-scans-reveal-googles-handiwork-20071207-gdrrhl.html.

[7] Marlena Millikin, "The Ghostly Disruption of Google Hands," *The Future of the Book* (blog), March 11, 2016, http://metadefect.com/2016/03/the-ghostly-disruption-of-google-hands/.

manuscripts and the internet with the protocological ("distributed, non-hierarchical") and printed books and television with the regulatory ("centralized, hierarchical"), thereby bracketing the tell-tale media of the modern period (77). Yeager's groupings violate the rules of periodization, which separate eras according to purported dissimilarities. I am excited to see how this grand theoretical vision plays with Jeff Jarvis's forthcoming book *The Gutenberg Parenthesis*[8] (its snazzy title has earlier origins[9]).

"The Coconut Cup as Material and Medium: Extended Ecologies," by Kathleen E. Kennedy, whose fascinating coconut work[10] has been rolling out for a few years, emerges as the most global and ecological chapter in the volume. Though coconuts had long been used as drinking vessels, their medieval importation into Europe from India resulted in a new media form: coconut drinkware with silver stems (and feet[11]). She traces how the coconut cup competed with the maple-wood cup in Europe and became an artifact of European colonization, whereby it then competed with—and, crucially, failed to displace—the organic drinkware of the Americas, especially that used for yerba and chocolate. One of many noteworthy features of this chapter is Kennedy's choice, contoured to this volume, of course, to treat the coconut cup as a medium instead of a thing, actant, or object. For Kennedy, the coconut cup "transmit[ted] . . . cultural information" (101). In that light, James Carey's work on communication as culture would have rounded out this chapter nicely (and been a better fit for what Kennedy is doing than John Durham Peters's book *Speaking into the Air*, which she finds problematic). Her choice seems more deliberate than that, though: To consider household items, which cultures often assign to be the province of women, as media or technologies—words with much more cachet outside of most theory circles than "things" and "objects"—is to give them a status they don't often enjoy.

The three chapters in the second part of the volume, "Affective Affordances," exhibit the counterpart to *longue durée*–based theorizing: intensive interpretation of singular media forms, respectively. The contributors select tags and glosses, letters, and commentaries, all of which take their affective charge from their institutional contexts (universities, cathedral schools, the church).

The first chapter, Fiona Somerset's "Multimedia Verse," and the last chapter, Alice Hutton Sharp's "The *Gloss* on Genesis and Authority in the Cathedral Schools," highlight the communal and material practices of what one might call accumulating interpretive authority by accretion. None of the historical actors, all students who have been anonymous for several hundred years, is trying to have either the first or the last word. Instead, they are using pre-existing

[8] Jeff Jarvis, *The Gutenberg Parenthesis: The Age of Print and Its Lessons for the Age of the Internet* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2023).

[9] Greg Peverill-Conti and Brad Seawell, "The Gutenberg Parenthesis: Oral Tradition and Digital Technologies," *CommForum* (blog), April 1, 2010, https://commforum.mit.edu/the-gutenberg-parenthesis-oral-tradition-and-digital-technologies-29e1a4fde271.

[10] Kathleen E. Kennedy, "Coconuts in Medieval England Weren't as Rare as *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* Made You Think," *The Mary Sue* (website), October 14, 2015, https://www.themarysue.com/monty-python-holy-grail-coconuts/.

[11] Coconut cup and cover, Ashmolean Museum Oxford, accessed October 15, 2022, https://collections.ashmolean.org/object/777202.

verses and texts to enter into larger cultural conversations. Somerset centers on deposits of verse-tag annotations, calling them a "technology of association" (107) that arose from student-readers of an early fourteenth-century copy of Gratian's *Decretum* actively interacting with the manuscript. For her part, Hutton Sharp treats cathedral schools as interpretive communities whose students collaborated to layer onto existing understandings of biblical passages and thus reflect (and genuflect to) the learning of their teachers. The chapter's media focus falls on how manuscript design shaped and was shaped by commentary practices. That authorship cannot be attributed to either verse tags or student glosses reminded me, at a slant, of Ann Blair's work-in-progress[12] on the anonymous amanuenses of big textual projects in the modern period. Their anonymity made "*the author*" possible.

In the penultimate chapter, "Ex Illo Tempore: Time, Mediation, and the *Ars Dictaminis* in Letter 65 by Peter the Venerable," Jonathan M. Newman treats the medieval letter as an object lesson in understanding media. Because the letter is both a medium (an in-between material) and a form (a shape emerging from a topical and structural conventions), when letter writers reflect on absence, distance, permanence, speed, attention, and affection, they're frequently issuing metacommentary on the nature of media. Letter 65, sent from one twelfth-century abbot to another, arose from institutional and interpersonal rivalries. *Ars dictaminis* (the medieval technique system for letter-writing) taught its learners arts of address-over-distance that were exquisitely attuned to social hierarchy. When writer and addressee are of equal status but agonistically disposed, every dictaminal convention seems to bend toward creative or even mischievous use. In his letter to Bernard of Clairvaux, Peter uses affective commonplaces of Christian letter-writing to lead Bernard to the ask: If you care for me, as one committed Christian should for another, stop merely sending a quick hello through intermediaries and instead write. Peter seems to want his relationship with his rival on the record.

Somerset, Hutton Sharp, and Newman do not define or use the concept of affordance in their pieces, nor do they push too hard when they compare their units of medieval media analysis to digital ones (e.g., comment threads and emails). My interpretation is that their chapters act as action possibilities for readers, especially ones writing theories and histories of purportedly digital age phenomena.

Altogether, *Old Media and the Medieval Concept* boasts a gregarious character. It seems eager to be heard and to chat. As this review attests, while reading, I heard it talking with forthcoming books; I'll add here Bruce Holsinger's *On Parchment: Animals, Archives, and*

[12] Ann Blair, "Hidden Hands: Amanuenses and Authorship in Early Modern Europe," A. S. W. Rosenbach Lectures in Bibliography, Penn Libraries Repository, March 17, 18, 20, 2014, https://repository.upenn.edu/rosenbach/8/.

the Making of Culture from Herodotus to the Digital Age[13] and Anna Shechtman's book-in-progress on "the media concept."[14] My ideas for reading groups and graduate seminar units are scribbled throughout the margins of my copy and on obliging scraps of paper around my house.

In their introduction, co-editors Brylowe and Yeager claim that "a thoroughgoing rethinking of media history will show the continuities, reversals, and overlaps are more compelling than revolutions or epochs, as they help us both to better understand what the artifacts of the past have to teach us and to better respond to the contingencies of our own historical moment" (22). The six contributors took up the call. I hope those of us writing and teaching histories of media, communication, information, and rhetoric will, too.

Bibliography

Blair, Ann. "Hidden Hands: Amanuenses and Authorship in Early Modern Europe." A. S. W. Rosenbach Lectures in Bibliography. Penn Libraries Repository. March 17, 18, 20, 2014. https://repository.upenn.edu/rosenbach/8/.

Guillory, John. "Genesis of the Media Concept." *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 2 (2010): 321–62.

Holsinger, Bruce. O*n Parchment: Animals, Archives, and the Making of Culture from Herodotus to the Digital Age*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023.

Jarvis, Jeff. *The Gutenberg Parenthesis: The Age of Print and Its Lessons for the Age of the Internet*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2023.

Kittler, Friedrich. *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990.

McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962.

[13] Bruce Holsinger, O*n Parchment: Animals, Archives, and the Making of Culture from Herodotus to the Digital Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023).

[14] Anna Shechtman, Personal website, accessed October 15, 2022, https://www.annashechtman.com/.