This book demonstrates quite effectively that visual studies need constant conversation with the broader study of material culture. In their introduction to the volume, the editors argue that re-assigning the eye to its network of somatic affiliations allows one to reconstitute visuality as a more embodied activity. This permits, they suggest, not only a greater attentiveness to the material circuits that the visual inhabits but also enables a more synesthetic account of sight. They especially emphasize the “chiastic crossings of the visible and the tangible” invoking a long tradition of theorizing sight that goes at least as far back as Lucretius (7).

The essays in this collection deal with a very eclectic range of subjects, but all of them link the visual to other elements of the material world. Addressing a striking diversity of topics, contributions range from Wordsworth’s ophthalmic problems vis-à-vis the theme of sight in his poetry to the history of the book and its implications for the visual apprehension of texts. But with some success the editors try to categorize the essays into four sections defined by means of theme and chronology.

The first section, titled “Blinding Visions” opens with Sophie Thomas’s essay on the Medusa myth and Shelley’s treatment of it in his poem “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery.” Shelley’s poem has attracted a fair amount of critical
attention in recent times and Thomas’s analysis of the poem operates very much within
the critical frames provided by W.J.T. Mitchell (*Picture Theory* [1994] 171-76), James
Heffernan (*Museum of Words* [1993] 119-24), and Carol Jacobs (*Yale French Studies* 69
[1985] 163-79). She endorses Mitchell’s view that the poem represents the “primal scene
of ekphrastic poetry” in its ability to invoke and deconstruct the ekphrastic gaze through
the description of Medusa as the gazer rather than the gazed at. What Thomas adds to the
fascinating body of scholarship on the poem is an exploration of the tensions between
visibility and invisibility inherent in the phantasmagoric representations of the myth of
Medusa. Thomas counterpoints such visual spectacles with Shelley’s own attempts to
“radically reconfigure the petrifying potential of his subject” in order to present Medusa
as a “figure for resistance” (26, 39).

In the second essay of the first section, Heather Tilley addresses blindness and
vision from a more material and biographic context. Her essay on Wordsworth employs
the material context of the poet’s trachoma and subsequent loss of vision to interrogate
some of the more idealist accounts of Wordsworth’s pronouncements on sight. Tilley
lucidly and richly explains the history of Wordsworth’s blindness and the material
supports to which the ailing poet turned. But the critical payoff here is mixed. While
Tilley shows that we cannot fully understand Wordsworth’s poetry without knowing
something of his blindness, she scarcely explains how this fascinating biographical
evidence reconstitutes any of the conceptual frameworks that govern our study of his
work. However, as Tilley herself acknowledges in her conclusion, she chiefly aims to
make Wordsworth’s blindness known to scholars—as a way of thickening our
understanding of his poetry.
In the second section of the collection, titled “Photographs and their Pleasures,” Lindsay Smith makes a strong case for an anti-mimetic approach to photography. Basing her analysis on the distinctively temporal quality of the photographic instant, she subordinates familiar questions of resemblance and illusionism to the more fundamental temporal conundrum that photographs embody. For Smith, “photographic resemblance points up a potential break in the story of mimesis” (66). She argues that the power of the photograph lies in its ability to articulate an instant that marks a dialectical compression of its own history and the corresponding latencies that inhere in that moment. This makes the photograph uniquely capable of suggesting “in its apparent mirroring relation to the world the secret of metamorphosis as temporal dislocation” (83). The idea of the photographic instant generated a range of nineteenth century responses rooted in the material aspects of photographic technology (like the long exposure times, which Smith mentions) and figures as an enduring theme in contemporary writing about photography.

Given the nature of Smith’s claim and the density of scholarship on the subject (Berger, Cavell, Benjamin, and Kracauer have all had a fair amount to say on the photographic instant and the quality of photographic duration) I found the theorization a bit sparse and in need of greater elaboration. However, Smith’s reading of Shelley’s account of the statue of Niobe at the Uffizi gallery in Florence is an illuminating account of the statue’s ability to embody a temporal quality similar to that of photographic duration. This reading also helps to buttress her counter-intuitive claim that sculpture works more like photography than painting does.

In the second essay on photography, Stefano Evangelista examines the homoerotic photographs of Wilhelm Von Gloeden, the German photographer whose work was
introduced in Britain by John Addington Symonds. Evangelista explores a fascinating network “of collaboration and identity formation among homosexual men across countries (England, Italy and Germany) and artistic media (literature and photography)” (97). In his excellent analysis of Von Gloeden’s photographs of young male bodies, he shows the tension between the classicizing impulse (that idealizes the body) and the realist aesthetic (unmistakable signs of manual labor evident on the hands of his models). This tension, Evangelista argues, generates a particular erotic discourse around these photographs—a “progressive discourse of homosexual emancipation…aligned to fundamentally conservative desires of objectification and orientalist collecting” (102). As Evangelista presents them, then, Von Gloeden’s photographs present a material instantiation of the structural tension that most photographs evince by virtue of their parallel claims to indexical and iconic value.

The third section of the collection, titled “Illustrations and Latent Images” consists of two essays that study the intersection of texts and images. Graham Smith’s fascinating study of the various settings in Henry James’s “Daisy Miller” illustrates James’s sophisticated understanding of the relationship between words and pictures. Since the Roman locales in which “Daisy Miller” is set would have been familiar to readers, Smith suggests that James’s descriptions function as undeveloped photographs that are “stirred…into wakefulness in receptive readers’ minds” (124). Like James’s “latent” descriptions, Smith’s suggestive analysis sheds new light on James’s treatment of the relationship between the visual and the verbal.

This relationship likewise occupies Lorraine Kooistra in her essay on the layout and design of The Yellow Book. She carefully describes the efforts of the two editors—
especially Aubrey Beardsley—to make the text a beautiful material object with a distinct visual form. For Kooistra, *The Yellow Book*’s “poetics of format,” primarily the separation of letterpress from pictures, enables the visual to operate with an autonomy which, besides freeing it from a referential role, allows for a whole new mode of visual-verbal sequencing (140). According to Kooistra, the visual experience of reading, touching and seeing *The Yellow Book* allows one to discern among the pictures “a poetic relationship with each other and with the verbal texts they are interleaved with” (142).

Poised at the cusp between book history and visual studies Kooistra’s reading reveals the rich potential for work that succeeds in drawing on the insights of both disciplines.

The final section, titled “Precious Objects” features two essays on the relationship between objects and queer identities. The first examines the visual properties of jewels and their particular deployment in late-Victorian constructions of masculinity; the second links Victorian theories of reading to the possibility of articulating a homosexual theory of reading that is receptive to the complex imbrication of the visual and the verbal.

In a competent reading of two novels, Huysmans’ *Against Nature* and Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray*, Victoria Mills explains what each of them does with jewels. In a number of interesting ways, she shows how queerness—in these two novels—problematises notions of collecting and cataloguing by presenting a dialectic between the selective focus of collecting and the mobile and distracted gaze of the dandy, who resists the concentration required of the collector. Jewels, Mills argues, are “like dandy identity” in that “they are both fixed and dispersed,” and queer identity likewise displays an “unsustainable” tension between “dispersion and concentration of personality” (161).
In the very original and sensitively argued final essay of the collection, Michael Hatt tries to imagine a theory of homosexual reading. Reading two photographs by Fred Holland Day and examining John Gray’s collection of poetry, Silverpoints (1893) in terms of its typography, formatting and design, he aims to demonstrate “a visual approach to reading, one that can be understood in terms of an imaginative or experiential blossoming” (173). Against the “literary didacticism” of more mainstream nineteenth-century theories of reading represented by Ruskin and Arnold, this mode of reading—Hatt argues—makes the text an “optic instrument” with which “to read another world into existence” (174, 182, 173).

As is evident from the above account, this book surveys a large terrain of material culture and opens up many pathways for further inquiry. The wide range of subjects explored shows how the visual mediates the world of material objects in multiple ways. These objects, whether they are books, photographs, or gems, produce and submit to different protocols of looking.

The sheer span covered by the book, both in terms of subjects and methodologies, makes it difficult to imagine a clear conceptual map on which these essays may be configured. In their introduction to the collection the editors attempt to furnish the coordinates of just such a map. But since they admit that this collection eschews “large narratives and bold philosophical sweeps” and instead “pay[s] attention to small details,” it is not surprising that the essays often overlap the conceptual frames that the editors construct for them or that some essays sit less easily than others within the narratives that are meant to hold them in place.
In sum, this book does not fully succeed in re-contextualizing visual studies. By linking visual studies with the study of objects such as the book in all their material tangibility, this volume places visual studies within a broader, more mainstream materialist framework. As is evident in some of the essays, this is a welcome and productive move. However, greater inclusiveness often comes at a price and this book sometimes loses in depth what it gains in breadth. When visual studies is “at large” and ubiquitous as it is in this book, it risks slipping out of focus. Because it is broadly invested in the tangible and fully embodied understanding of nineteenth-century material cultures, this book gives insufficient time and attention to a number of good “visual studies moments.”

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