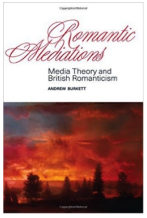
ROMANTIC MEDIATIONS: MEDIA THEORY AND BRITISH ROMANTICISM



By Andrew Burkett
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Reviewed by Randall Sessler on 2017-12-08.

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British Romanticism and media studies have shared a unique relationship in the history of literary scholarship. To see why Romanticism has long been considered an era of print, one need only recall such things as Wordsworth's meticulous attention to the layout of his poems, Charles Lamb's famous 1811 essay on staging Shakespeare, the Romantic turn away from stage production in favor of printed plays, and Coleridge's claim that his public lectures had little value because they lacked the permanence of print.

For decades, specialists in Romanticism have examined its connection with the new print possibilities of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and what emerges, rises, or grows during the period. For instance, in *The Politics of Enchantment: Romanticism, Media, and Cultural Studies* (2002), John David Black describes Romanticism as one of the effects of print: "Coming some three centuries after the invention of the mechanical press, romanticism was the mature cultural expression of the cumulative effects of Gutenberg's breakthrough" (134). This "cultural expression" includes the emergence of new social categories and phenomena. In books such as William St. Clair's landmark *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (2004) and Andrew Franta's *Romanticism and the Rise of the Mass Public* (2007), Romanticism has been identified with the rise of literature, and correspondingly with the rise of concepts such as "the reading nation," "the mass public," and print culture.

In recent years, however, scholars have begun to examine other media of the Romantic era. For example, Alexander Dick and Angela Esterhammer's essay collection *Spheres of Action: Speech and Performance in Romantic Culture* (2009) highlights public speaking and body language. This shift in focus contests the longstanding notion that Romanticism was essentially mental or, in Judith Thompson's words, "an imaginative rather than a performative movement, a movement of mind rather than mouth, as it were" (qtd. 3). Clifford Siskin and William Warner also cast a wider net for Romantic-period media in their influential essay collection *This Is Enlightenment* (2010). For Siskin and Warner, "mediation" in "its broadest sense" denotes "'media' of every kind -- everything that intervenes, enables, supplements, or is simply in between" (qtd. 5). Scholars now realize, therefore, that print was only one of several media through which Romanticism emerged. Although the concept of "media specificity" is usually associated with the twentieth century, we are now learning that Romantic authors and artists had to choose among varieties of media.

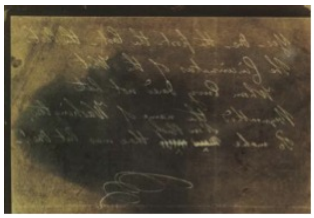
Besides situating his work among these active conversations, Burkett also proposes new objects of inquiry. In *The Difference Engine*, a novel published in 1990, William Gibson and Bruce Sterling offer an alternative history of the Romantic era wherein Byron, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats play an exaggerated and anachronistic, role "in the storied past of media and other technologies" (qtd. 2). Taking his cue from this novel, Burkett sets out to find real as well as unexpected "connections between Romantic writers and their texts and the history of media technologies from roughly the turn of the nineteenth century to the present" (3).

As he lays the groundwork for his book and introduces his varied objects of inquiry, Burkett makes it clear that his work will foreground *mediations* rather than *media* because the former term unburdens him from "solidified or totalized objects or systems" (9). Burkett's argument has precedents, for he approvingly cites such previous work as *This is Enlightenment* and "The Medium of Romantic Poetry" (2008), the pioneering essay in which Celeste Langan and Maureen N. McLane probe the intersection of Romanticism and media. Burkett also clearly contrasts his approach with that of Friedrich Kittler and other technodeterminists. Unlike them, he highlights the process of mediation: "incipient media systems" and "questions and concerns related to technical storage and processing capacities of media rather than on fully formed media devices or systems" (9).

Burkett's work breaks fresh ground. Timely and engaging, it combines a command of both media and Romantic studies with new objects of inquiry. Ranging from the nineteenth century to our current media-saturated moment, Burkett stages unexpected conversations between Keats and F. Scott Fitzgerald, for instance, as well as between Blake and filmmaker Jim Jarmusch. In doing so, Burkett sets out to illustrate "Romanticism's role in the creation and/or alteration of technical media systems" (16).

Burkett divides his book into two parts. The first and second chapters "focus on the relationship between Romantic texts and the techniques of technical storage media" (13). In the first chapter, he examines William Henry Fox Talbot's

decision to create -- in 1840 -- "a photogenic drawing negative" of Lord Byron's *Ode to Napoleon* (1814) that included five lines cut from the published version of the poem as well as Byron's signature (19):



According to Burkett, Talbot's negative exemplifies "the rich, complex, and subtle ways in which the medium of Romantic poetry crucially participated in the birth of this era's new medium of negative-positive photography" (22). While insightfully linking the ode to both Byron's fame and the influence of his publisher John Murray, the first chapter argues that Talbot creates and uses, at least in part, "proto-photographic technology" in order to participate in "the phenomenon of Byronism" (43).

Turning from Byron to Keats, the second chapter links "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819) to the advent of the phonograph. Throughout the chapter, Burkett finds Keats's poem anticipating descriptions of early phonograph use. "In ways remarkably similar to the Keatsian revelation of the fantastical impossibility of voice's unmediated transport," Burkett writes, "early reports concerning the phonographic reproduction of sound dream about listening to suddenly immortal voices" (59). To illustrate his point, Burkett cites a 1939 recording of F. Scott Fitzgerald reading "Ode to a Nightingale", though only its first three stanzas survive. According to Burkett, Keats's evocation of acousmatic voices, voices whose source cannot be seen, adumbrates the possibilities as well as the limitations of phonographic transmission. The fact that Fitzgerald's voice sounds anything but flawless makes the recording an even more productive case study. For Burkett, the imperfection of both the voice itself and the audio quality of the recording show how Keats's poem is "taken up and transformed by" new media (16). Ultimately, in Burkett's formulation, "the mutation of Keatsian voice -- as well as dramatically altered form and content -- comes to live on the phonographic record with a new life of its own" (68). While this suggestion is indeed provocative, it could be strengthened by further elaboration and a more thorough examination of this "new" medial life.

In chapters three and four, Burkett shifts "from questions of storage to those of processing and networking, and ultimately to digital media" (73). Juxtaposing Blake's illuminated plates with the history of cinema, chapter three shows "compelling connections between Blake's plates and the ways in which twentieth-century filmmakers like [Jim] Jarmusch and British experimental director Guy Brenton variously translate Blake's work into cinematic moving images" (13). Building on Saree Makdisi's *William Blake and the Impossibility of History of the 1790s* (2007), which contends that Blake's work is not meant to be experienced in a linear fashion, Burkett argues that movement animates not only Blake's work but also his creative process. "Blake's intentions," Burkett writes, "go far beyond this matter of linking poetic and pictorial images on a singular plate and point more clearly in the direction of challenging his audiences to imagine a process of visual materialization of such an image in broader terms" (101).

The final chapter asks why scholars of current and emerging digital media are so much drawn to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Among other websites, Burkett examines *FrankenMOO* (2001) , which virtually displays every room and several objects featured in the novel, and the Romantic Circles Electronic Edition of *Frankenstein* (2009), which features pop-up notes within the text, an exhaustive appendix of works referenced in the novel, and innovative navigation tools. Projects such as these, Burkett shows, are prompted by the novel's preoccupation with information and the ways in which information is stored and circulated. As Burkett aptly observes, Frankenstein himself "privileges information over material instantiation" (129), and the novel as a whole "ultimately rejects materialist philosophy" for "virtuality, even in its narrative structure" (134).

This book is less than wholly convincing. While its range is ambitious, it lacks consistent cogency. At times, it overstates the connection between objects separated by decades or centuries and circulating across multiple media. Did Fox Talbot, for instance, really create new photographic techniques because of a desire to participate in Byronism--some sixteen years after the poet's death? Did Fitzgerald's recording of Keats's ode really transform it? Burkett aims, he says, to reveal "Romanticism's role in the creation and/or alteration of technical media systems" (16). This book, however, is most convincing when it shows how Romantic artists and works participate in unexpected media, rather than creating or altering them.

Nevertheless, Burkett's book articulates a new and refreshing approach to Romantic media studies. By opening new pathways and situating Romanticism in longer media histories that reach our own current multimedia moment, Burkett calls on scholars to further explore "the potential of media archaeology for the Romantic text and its long afterlife, which haunts us even today" (140). In concluding an engaging and lively work, this call to action invites a resounding answer.

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