

“seeing by electricity” or what distant viewing might look like. This is not simply a matter of representations. Rather, by opening the discussion to include cinematic imaginations of the broadcasting or transmission function—that at the time was mainly radio’s domain—Galili unravels a more dynamic, multifaceted notion of periodization. After all, this was a pivotal time not just for modern mass-media, but for modernity itself, and the author thereby expounds an early televisual flow that nourished various medial desires and needs in that historical context. *Seeing by Electricity* thus historicizes a prolonged moment, or a mediascape, when boundaries between media were porous, whereas the otherwise antagonistic relationships between media can be seen as symbiotic.

From this perspective, the book challenges a commonly accepted historical narrative, and suggests instead a more flexible and broader contextualization of radio, television, and film as mutually contributing networks. Similarly, it also facilitates aligning classical film theorist such as Rudolf Arnheim with experimental filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov on the same platform with a popular medium. Along similar lines, one could theorize next to telegraphy, a notion Galili refers to at several points, the possibility of not just “seeing,” but even “reading” by electricity, as some indeed do today on their tablets or computer screens. Consequently, one might push this way of thinking even further, to see again beyond any apparatus, as a function of networking between several user-based, participatory modes of transmitting information, without relying on a sender-recipient model of communication or interaction. Finally, if one does attribute “seeing by electricity” to television, it would enable on the one hand to articulate streaming services, for instance, as taking part in a similar emerging evolution of the medium. On the other, however, one might ask if perception itself can entirely be dislocated from the apparatus, and televisuality emancipated from any boxed-in mechanism, electric or otherwise.

Nam June Paik may have already provided a clue as to what that might look like.

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James J. Hodge. *Sensations of History: Animation and New Media Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. 232 pp.

SHANE DENSON

With *Sensations of History: Animation and New Media Art*, James J. Hodge adds his voice to a growing chorus of scholars who came up during the heyday of media studies’ fascination with technological infrastructures and invisible underlying processes, but who now find themselves returning to the realm of *the aesthetic*—both in the narrow sense of the term as it pertains to art and artistic experience, and in the broader sense as it concerns sensation more generally. To be clear, this is not a simple reversal or turn away from the insights of infrastructure studies and media archaeology, not simply a revival of older forms of analysis derived from literature, film studies, and art history, for example, but instead a significant *recasting* of experience—and a redoubling of attention to the conditions and processes of experience—in *light* of our conscious and nonconscious interfaces with infrastructures that are not cut to human measure.

In Hodge's case, this involves a revisionary encounter between phenomenology and poststructuralist theory, on the one hand, with the sensible forms and insensible structures of computation and digital art on the other. In what might be called an *aesthetics of the encounter*, Hodge foregrounds the embodied experience of human perceivers as they encounter the limits of their perception via the *experiential opacity* of computation that expresses itself in both the reflexive forms of new media art and in our emphatically *unreflexive* daily interfaces with digital devices and environments. Such an aesthetics of the encounter demands a rethinking of the parameters of experience itself, as the narrower region of conscious perception finds itself entwined with a broader realm of sensation positively innervated (to use a Benjaminian term) by our increasingly lively, *animate* technologies. Thus, an aesthetics of encounter looks to new media art not in order to clarify our vision and confirm the contours of the phenomenological subject but to open it to what Hodge calls a "felt nonrelation to the infrastructure informing lived experience" (p. 108). This expansion of sensation beyond the narrowly subjective also invites a revision of art-historical modes of appreciation by turning away from the concentrated focal attention devoted to art history's valued (inherently valuable) objects and towards the ephemeral and every day, thus countering universalizing hierarchies of value by embracing the altogether *ordinary* experience of inattention that betokens a blurring of subjects and objects alike.

But the book's most original contribution lies in the way this experience is connected to history. Hodge argues that our aesthetic encounter with the opaque but animated alterity of digital media opens up a new space of historical experience. In part, this depends on the media-historical and art-historical revisions enacted by new media artworks that engage in a reflexive updating of cinematic and precinematic media (like Eadward Muybridge's chronophotography) for the digital world. Crucially, however, the stakes of Hodge's argument are much larger: when we take into account not only art but also more mundane technical operations (and here we sense a troubling of the art/technology split itself), we discover a more general transformation of the conditions of historicity: animation replaces narration as the dominant mode of access/encounter with the past, as the microtemporal operations of the digital resist the human framework of narrative but nevertheless make themselves felt, or manifest aesthetically, in the form of animation. But the point is not just that animation becomes the new *vehicle* of historiography; and to the extent that it does, it is important to understand animation not exclusively in the narrow sense of cartoons, CGI, or indeed the strictly visual *image* at all, but in a broader frame of life-like alterity that innervates sensation as an environmental force today. In this broader frame, we are dealing with new modes of *inscription*, new means by which the past imprints and transmits itself materially into the present world—and thus with new phenomenal conditions of historical experience, grounded in new configurations of time. Hodge writes: "What if we focus instead on the time at hand, or at least the opacity of time that seems so commonly and precisely out of hand or off to the side of experience? In the service of this thought, I want to stay with the textual opacity of digital media. It is only by developing a vocabulary attentive to the instability of the encounter with digital media that we will be able to inquire more deeply into the transformation of historical temporality" (p. 105).

In developing this vocabulary, which involves terms such as the "lateral time" of ordinary inattention in computational networks, *Sensations of History* makes an important contribution to our self-understanding in a digital age. Indeed, Hodge's book provides an indispensable interrogation of the historical conditions that make it possible to speak of a "digital age" in the first place—importantly going against the grain of ahistorical media theories and proclamations that digital media mark the "end of history" or of temporal experience itself. Combining brilliant analyses of digital artworks (from Phil Solomon's *Last Days in a Lonely Place* to John F. Simon Jr.'s *Every Icon* and Barbara Lattanzi's *Optical*

De-Dramatization Engine [O.D.E.] with enlightening appraisals of more mundane, ephemeral media (from the mindless videogame *Cookie Clicker* to our mindless encounters with software-installation progress bars), and reading both of them through highly original engagements with philosophy (including Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, Bernard Stiegler, and others), Hodge's *Sensations of History: Animation and New Media Art* will be of interest to a wide range of scholars from disciplines across the humanities (minimally including film and media studies, art history, and philosophy, but also literature and history). Balancing this interdisciplinary scope with precise theoretical interventions and doing so in a manner that is consistently rigorous, engaging, and accessible, it is not exaggerated to say that this is a truly profound step towards the articulation of a much-needed theory of *the historical aesthetics of encounter*.

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Susan Stewart. *The Ruins Lesson: Meaning and Material in Western Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. 379 pp.

ANDREW HUI

"All men take a secret delight in beholding ruins. This sentiment arises from the frailty of our nature, and a secret conformity between these destroyed monuments and the caducity of our own existence," Chateaubriand writes in *The Genius of Christianity* (1802).¹ As the doyen of the French Romantics, he was not the only person in his period to take delight in such obsolescent monuments. For many, such delights were open rather than secret. Volney writes *Les ruines, ou méditation sur les révolutions des empires*, an essay on the philosophy of history (which Thomas Jefferson translates and Mary Shelley has Frankenstein read in his self-education); Bryon sees himself as a "ruin amidst ruins." Blake pens "Jerusalem," Wordsworth "Tintern Abbey," Shelley "Ozymandias."

Susan Stewart's new book, *The Ruins Lesson: Meaning and Material in Western Culture*, has a finely wrought section on the Romantics, but the special interest of this book is its transhistorical scope and imaginative amplitude. For forty years now, she has been one of our most admired poet-critics. On my bookshelf I place her next to luminaries such as Marina Warner, Anne Carson, and Robert Pogue Harrison. This latest title arrives as an elegiac, crowning monument on the perennial entanglement between *les mots et les choses* of European civilization. This is simply the best work on the aesthetics of ruins out there.

1. F. A. Chateaubriand, *The Beauties of Christianity*, trans. Frederic Shoberl, vol. 1 (London, 1813), p. 368.