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Review: Print Culture: From Steam Press to Ebook

by Frances Robertson

Reviewed by Aaron Humphrey

One of the pillars of academic discourse is the notion that typeset words printed in the pages of books and periodicals can form a reliable record of scholarly thought. This notion of the supremacy of print was derided by Saussure and teased apart by Derrida, who traced debate about the printed word back to Plato.

Frances Robertson's robust history of the technologies, discourses and practices that surround the 'marked surface' of the printed page does not reach back nearly that far, but begins around 1800, when the printing business became increasingly industrialised. By offering an overview of how attitudes about the authority, fixity and authenticity of print have been shaped by culture and technologies since the Victorian era, Robertson provides a background to many of the myths that power our word processors.

Print Culture: From Steam Press to Ebook traces the development of printing from a labour-intensive, loud and smelly business to the establishment of desktop publishing and PDF files. Compressing two hundred years of the processes and history of print into less than 150 pages (including notes), Robertson has organised her book into chapters which each examine the cultural ramifications of a specific development such as typesetting, letterpress or lithography. She pays close attention to the human labour involved in print culture, and how it has shaped our understanding of what printing means. She describes how the stark contrast between ink and paper made it was necessary for press houses at the turn of the 19th Century to divide labour into work that was 'either finicky or heavy, dirty or clean' (40), and how

the wide-spread adoption of typewriters at the start of the 20th Century in offices was accompanied by a 'feminisation' of secretarial work, 'where the word "typewriter" denoted both machine and subservient female employee' (105).

While Robertson shows how print has at times been built up as a symbol of power and authority, as replicated in mundane objects like timetables and paper currency, she also examines facets that have been marginalised including cheap chromolithographic postcards and church newsletters printed on home office equipment. Ultimately, she argues convincingly that the ways we think about print culture are just as vital in the development of discourse and power relations as printed documents themselves.

In the process, she reveals the historical and cultural impetus behind McLuhan's 'premature farewell to the "Gutenberg Galaxy,"' as well as how a premature anniversary feast served to help enshrine Gutenberg's as print's seemingly-uncontested historical hero. I found this to be an engaging, substantial and well-researched overview of the field.