



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Writing Technology in Meiji Japan: A Media History of Modern Japanese Literature and Visual Culture*, by Seth Jacobowitz.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/137756/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Hayter, I (2019) *Writing Technology in Meiji Japan: A Media History of Modern Japanese Literature and Visual Culture*, by Seth Jacobowitz. *Japan Forum*, 31 (2). pp. 287-292.
ISSN 0955-5803

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2017.1378699>

© 2017, Irena Hayter. This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Japan Forum* on 27 Sep 2017, available online:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/09555803.2017.1378699>. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Seth Jacobowitz, *Writing Technology in Meiji Japan: A Media History of Modern Japanese Literature and Visual Culture*, Harvard University Asia Center, Cambridge, MA, 2016, xii + 299 pp.

Modern Japanese literature begins with a haunting, according to Seth Jacobowitz. *Kaidan botan dōrō* (*Ghost Story of the Peony Lantern*, 1884), a series of pamphlets based on the shorthand transcription of a *rakugo* performance by the celebrated San'yūtei Enchō (1839–1900), is a phantasmal presence not only due to its content, but also because of its meaning as a media-historical event. This text produced the two reigning tropes of modern Japanese literature: phonetic transparency (the illusion of 'writing as one speaks' created by the unified style, *genbun itchi*) and mimetic realism (p. 197). Conventional literary histories, however, elide the importance of the transcription, effectively suppressing the material origins of literary production and the role of shorthand, 'leaving it to haunt the margins of the canon as a ghostly remainder', in Jacobowitz's beautiful and potent phrase (p. 195). The aim of his study is to excavate not only the media archaeology of shorthand, but also to dislodge authors and texts from their privileged position in canonical accounts by focusing on externalities such as discursive transformations and inscriptive technologies or as he puts it, 'media as imbued with agency' (p. 10). Well-known figures and works such as Tsubouchi Shōyō's *Shōsetsu shinzui* (*Essence of the Novel*, 1885), Futabatei Shimei's *Ukigumo* (*Floating Clouds*, 1887) and Natsume Sōseki's *Wagahai wa neko de aru* (*I Am a Cat*, 1905) are recast as simply 'relays in media concepts, practices and processes' (p. 10). It is a bold attempt to dismantle orthodoxies about authors and texts and push to the foreground other, less naturalized convergences, disruptions in linear narratives, obscured junctures. Readers familiar with Friedrich Kittler, the major theoretical presence in Jacobowitz's project, will recognize the anti-humanist, post-hermeneutics reflexes of his work; others might detect overtones of technological

determinism. This is probably the first book-length study in the Japan field that applies systematically Kittler's approach and it could have done with a more sustained discussion of his work, given the ambivalent relationship which area studies traditionally has had with 'theory'. On the other hand, in a non-Western context Kittlerian narratives of imported technological inventions transforming a social field from the outside might provide an attractive explanatory schema, but they resonate problematically with the teleologies of modernization theory that have come under attack in recent years.

'Media', Kittler (1999, p. xxxix) states famously, 'determine our situation'. A particularly lucid gloss to this provocatively blunt pronouncement is provided by Josh Ellenbogen (2014, p. 132):

Before technologies answered the needs of human agents or derived from stages in the history of human consciousness, or served to communicate meanings that preexisted the media, the technologies themselves determined the nature of the human, the historical pattern of its thinking, and the field of possibilities from which any particular meanings might emerge.

In a way, Kittler radicalizes Foucault, identifying his historical a priori with technological transformations, as well as providing a more rigorous anchoring of epistemic shifts. Most extreme versions of Kittler are not only indifferent to the concerns of Anglophone cultural studies (hegemony, resistance; positionalities of gender, race and class); they also seem to privilege hard technological facts to discursive formations. For Jacobowitz the intrusion of the railroad in the countryside 'registered an epistemic rupture'; in the blurb of the book 'the rise of communication networks such as telegraph and post', as well as 'debates over national

language' are referred to as epistemic transformations: his concept of episteme is closer to that of Kittler rather than Foucault, for whom, as Deleuze (2006, p.34) stresses, machines were always social before they were technical. But Jacobowitz's approach is more nuanced and sensitive, equally attentive to technological developments, discursive shifts and conceptual transformations. Burgeoning communication technologies, standardisation movements and techniques of phonetic capture are discussed in their historical and institutional embeddedness. Texts, both literary and non-literary, are seen as important nodal points in these networks. The focus is on the mechanisms through which both materialities and discourses produced modern nationalist/imperialist subjectivities.

What is also new and refreshing about the book is Jacobowitz's argument that 'a multiplicity of *globally synchronic* media concepts, practices and processes were assembled in Meiji (p. 12, my emphasis). There is always the question how we situate and conceptualize the non-Western modern; whether we are dealing with a singular modernity driven by the universalising logic of capitalism, as Fredric Jameson has insisted, or whether we need to emphasise difference, as in Dilip Gaonkar's concept of alternative modernities, or the co-eval modernities of Marilyn Ivy and Harry Harootunian. There is a rhetorical mechanism at work in these conceptualizations that can might affirm, even through negation, the primacy and centrality of the West as a historical subject: the other's experience is always secondary, defined *in relation to* the West. Some of these debates in effect presuppose a notion of Western modernity as monolithic, always already formed, almost reified. Jacobowitz, on the other hand, finds shared temporalities and points of connection that exceed the vocabulary of belatedness and catching-up favoured by modernization theory: he shows that movements for

standardization and language reform in Europe and America, 'parallel, overlap or in some cases are in direct dialogue with the modernization and modernity of Meiji Japan' (p. 10).

The book consists of four parts, focused on different fields in the Meiji episteme and its technological and material determinants, some of them less organically connected to the problematic of language and literature than others. Each part also contains short textual and visual analyses that are like close-ups of the dynamic relationships between the text and its material and discursive contexts. In line with the post-hermeneutic stance, these are not about meaning; rather, they trace the self-inscriptions of media technologies and concepts in the text. Part one, 'Discourse Networks', presents the general media-historical conditions of Meiji and examines the establishment of the telegraph network and the postal system together with the systems that introduced the metrics of modern, i.e. national and imperial, time and space. Jacobowitz shows how previously heterogeneous local practices of the body and the senses, some rooted in centuries of cultural training, were remade into universal quantifiable units and trajectories. Some of these histories have been told before, but Jacobowitz brings a new stress on global synchronicity, as well as attention to the role of these developments in the production of nationalized subjectivities and the assemblage of a mediated imagined community. What is not immediately obvious and perhaps could have been fleshed out in more detail is the relationship of these processes to the media history of modern Japanese literature and visual culture, apart from the shared loss of continuity with previous cultural formations. Jacobowitz does argue very convincingly, however, that standardization movements, communication technologies and the phonetic rescripting of language are all manifestations of the Heideggerian principle of 'standing reserve' (*Bestand*), which, '... by extension can bring about relations of commensurability and exchange value where none

previously existed . . . [conforming] to a common register (capitalism, nationalism and so on) . . . brought to bear upon nearly all aspects of being...It is the logic of an increasingly homogenous global system of quantification, commodification and exchange' (p. 21–22). Part two, 'Scripting National Language', begins with Mori Arinori (1847–1889), ambassador to the United States and later Minister of Education, and his exchanges with his Anglophone counterpart language reformers. Mori's infamous proposal from 1872, which advocated adopting simplified English as national language, was criticized and ridiculed but as Jacobowitz emphatically demonstrates, subsequent efforts to limit the number of Chinese characters, standardise kana and fix romanization rules were consistent with his ideas (p. 13). This part also presents genuinely new material in English: it explores the adaptation of Isaac Pitman's shorthand phonography in Japan, historicizing competing theories and debates in both Japan and the West. Jacobowitz argues that shorthand '...contributed to a vast reorganization of economic, political and literary activity by means of rapid manual recording and transmission' (p. 14). The last chapter of part two continues this investigation into the phonetic rescripting of Japanese through a discussion of Isawa Shūji's adaptation of Alexandre Melville Bell's 'visible speech' and Isawa's role in the creation of imperial linguistics: the imported phonetic script could capture faithfully a unified national language, making it easier to teach to colonized and colonizer alike. What is notable about part three is that it discusses changes to the conceptual constellation of visual art and literature without separating those: it tracks shifts in the 'interpenetrating verbal, visual and oral regimes' (p. 196). Such an approach effectively exposes the historicity of the very division of domains and its roots in Romantic conceptions of each art conquering its medium and striving towards its own essence and distinctiveness, ideas which modernism amplified further and turned into orthodoxy. There are superb discussions here of the discursive changes to Edo woodblock print culture: the organic unity of text and

image in literati art (*bunjinga*), the visuality of popular fiction (*gesaku*) and its collective authorship all being re-defined and reordered along (post-Romantic) capitalist lines; the attendant partitioning of domains of art and the disciplining of knowledge. Analysing a scene from *Ukigumo* and its illustration, Jacobowitz shows how this text traverses cultural regimes: Japan's so-called first modern novel actually resists the division of the verbal and the visual, essential for the Meiji episteme, and the idea of 'the purely verbal and homogenously typographic text' (p. 211). The consideration of *Ghost Story of the Peony Lantern* restores shorthand to its crucial role in the conceptual constellation of 'writing things down just as they are' by including in full translation the preface by Wakabayashi Kanzō (1857–1938), who transcribed the performances. Wakabayashi argues that transcribed speech assumes an aesthetic value beyond that of accuracy and faithful capture because of its affective immediacy. This is the closest that Jacobowitz comes to explaining the rhetorical move through which shorthand practice became synonymous with mimetic realism, if indeed this fateful slippage was at the assumed origins of modern Japanese literature. Part three also discusses Shōyō's *Essence of the Novel*, whose ideas of psychological realism, Jacobowitz demonstrates, drew on the rhetoric of shorthand as verbal photography. Part four is taken by more detailed readings of the texts of Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902) and of Sōseki's *I Am a Cat*. Shiki's experiments are credited as transitional nodes between ' [the] intermediary transcription of shorthand reporters [and] writers who would take matters into their own hands to "write things down just as they are"' (p. 227): again, one wishes for more detail here. Sōseki's text, on the other hand, is seen to provide an abundance of comic examples of new technical and scientific protocols and plenty of parodic send-ups of new media.

There are some errors and inconsistencies that perhaps can be corrected in future editions.

'*Jyōri*' (p. 162) does not conform to any established romanization systems and is probably a typo; terms such as *rakugo* and *kōdan* should be italicized (or not) consistently. The same applies for the principle of giving Chinese characters for Japanese words: Jacobowitz gives the *kanji* for homophones such as *hanashi* ('storytelling' and 'speech'), but not for *kōen* ('public speaking' and 'public address') (p. 179). The name of contemporary scholar Kōno Kensuke is missing its macron. On p. 206, in Jacobowitz' translation of Tsubouchi Shōyō's preface to *Ghost Story of the Peony Lantern*, 'woman' should probably be 'women' in the phrase 'pander to woman and children' for the sake of number consistency. '*Daremo mita mono wa nai*', a line from Sōseki's mischievous lampooning of the ineffable Yamato spirit, translates as 'there's not a person who has seen it' (and not 'hasn't seen it', as in the book (p. 264)). Eisenstein did not use 'hieroglyph' interchangeably with 'ideogram' in his discussion of the principle of montage in Japanese culture, as Jacobowitz claims (p. 108 note 33): in the first English translation of the essay, which he revised himself, Eisenstein (1930, 1929) uses only 'hieroglyph' and in the original Russian text, *иероглиф* (hieroglyph, character). In Russian linguistics *иероглиф* is the generic category that encompasses pictographic, ideographic and logographic signs; etymologically the term comes from two Greek words meaning 'sacred' and 'carving', without any reference to figurality. The essay's English title became 'The Cinematic Principle and the Ideogram' (not 'ideograph', as Jacobowitz has it) in Jay Leyda's later translation, in which both 'hieroglyph' and 'ideogram' are used (Eisenstein 1949).

Jacobowitz explains clearly how his investigation relates to existing scholarship. Landmark interventions such as those of Kamei Hideo, Maeda Ai and Karatani Kōjin come in for some criticism for overlooking the shorthand connection. Although this is indeed the first media history of modern Japanese literature that follows a rigorously Kittlerian methodology and

brings in new archival evidence, it can be argued that it comes after paradigm-changing historicist and discursive readings by these critics. 'There is always more than one map for a territory', as Jonathan Sterne reminds us in his elegant explorations of the cultural worlds of sound reproduction (Sterne 2003, p. 3). The techno-materialism of Jacobowitz in a way radicalizes the materialist approach that dismantled ideas of transparent language and an organic, unmediated modern self: Karatani proposed as early as 1980 that 'the self and interiority which the novelistic "I" is supposed to express did not exist a priori, but were constituted through the mediation of material form, through the establishment of *genbun itchi*' (Karatani 1993, p. 77). Yoshimi Shun'ya (a name missing from the bibliography of the book) has also consistently explored the nexus of technology, cultural history and imperial ideology, including the direct relationship between the Meiji emperor's travels around Japan and the construction of the telegraph network, arguing that 'the emperor system does not exist in some essential form outside of the nationwide media system' (Yoshimi 2000, p. 401).

But this is still a groundbreaking book because of the depth of the archival research, the sophistication of the argument and the new trajectories of inquiry it opens up. Motoori Norinaga's notion of *kotodama*, the mythical power of oral incantation, was invoked by Tanakadate Aikitsu (1856–1952), polymath and inventor of the Nippon-shiki romanization system (p.40–41). It would be interesting to investigate how nativist phonocentrism resonated with imported phonetics-based ideas of national language: this asynchronicity does complicate the linear temporalities of modernization. It should also be noted that Jacobowitz's Japanese actants of time-space standardization, language reform and new verbal and visual regimes seem to form a uniformly homosocial circuit. Gender, however, was crucial to the emperor system. We can perhaps test in the Japanese context Kittler's compelling insights about the

paradoxical identity of the mother who stands for *both* nature and alphabetization, about the originary, mother-bound orality of the Romantic episteme. In Meiji Japan as well the state made “wise mothers” the agents of the children’s socialization into language: were they encouraged to teach their children to read through phonetics-based methods? Did the sound of words pronounced by the mother’s voice tie with infantile oral pleasure and does (silent, individuated) reading in later life conjure up the hallucination of the inner voice and the inner self, as Kittler has argued (Wellbery 1999, p. xxiii)? Such a history remains to be written.

Some of the intellectual enjoyment the book brings also comes from its knowing self-reflexivity, the instances where its form and content enact its methodological principles. Playful anachronisms such as the title of the last chapter, ‘Scratching Records with Sōseki’s Cat’, hint at ideas of non-linear, layered temporalities important to the field of media archaeology. The book does end with Sōseki’s cat, without an overall conclusion that would tie together all the strands of the argument. Such a strategy can be seen to embody, as it were, Kittler’s claim (1999, p. 18) about the media age proceeding in fitful jerks; the jump cut and the unfinished fragment are appropriate to the episteme of modernism. On the other hand, there are amusing transitions between sections where the writer masquerades as storyteller: ‘we must first turn to...’ (p. 185), ‘I must turn now...’ (p. 208) that echo phrases such as ‘*sore wa sate oki*’ (‘we will leave that for later’), hallmarks of the Edo narrator. There are even bigger self-conscious gestures: although the aim of his project is to move away from authorial agency and intentionality and focus on the materialities of communication, immediately before discussing how in *I Am a Cat* technologies of writing are at times represented as agents of historical change, Jacobowitz asserts that ‘...Sōseki effectively deconstructed the field of modern

Japanese literature...’ (p. 251). The author, then, has not been denied but perhaps only bracketed; pushed towards the margins, but still haunting our writing.

Irena Hayter

University of Leeds

References:

Deleuze, G., 2006. *Foucault* London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Eisenstein, S. [Эйзенштейн, Сергей], 1929. *За кадром (Outside the Shot)* [online]. Available from:

http://www.metaphor.narod.ru/eizenstein_beyond.htm [Accessed 20 June 2017].

Eisenstein, S., 1930. The cinematographic principle and Japanese culture (with a digression on montage and the shot). *Transitions*, 19/20, 90–103.

Eisenstein, S., 1949. *Film form: essays in film theory* New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.

Ellenbogen, J., 2014. Review of Erkki Huhtamo, *Illusions in motion: media archaeology of the moving panorama and related spectacles* and Laura Marks, *Enfoldment and infinity: an Islamic genealogy of new media art*. *Art Bulletin*, 96, 132–134.

Sterne, J., 2003. *The audible past: cultural origins of sound reproduction* Durham: Duke University Press.

Karatani, K., 1993. *Origins of modern Japanese literature* Durham: Duke University Press.

Wellbery, D.E., 1990. Foreword In F. Kittler *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, vii–xxxiii.

Kittler, F., 1990. *Discourse networks 1800/1900* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Kittler, F., 1999. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Yoshimi, S., 2000. The cultural politics of the mass-mediated emperor system in Japan. *In* P. Gilroy, L. Crossberg & A. McRobbie (eds.) *Without guarantees: in honour of Stuart Hall*. London: Verso, 395–415.