

The Paper Trail: Nineteenth-century Reading Practices and the Montage Effect of Modernity

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Taking my departure from the Vienna school of art historians known to Benjamin, which focussed on the history of perception, and from the seminal work of Jonathan Crary *Techniques of the observer*, I mean to retrace what I want to call a *montage* effect in the culture of the everyday, more specifically in the reading practices that vast audiences in the nineteenth-century were accustomed to through their exposure to a medium as multifaceted as our contemporary hypertextuality, i.e. print culture and the periodical press. I'll discuss the case of the sensational periodical *Belgravia* directed by Mary Elizabeth Braddon at the height of the sensation craze of the 1860s, a turning point in the history of British popular culture. *Belgravia* offers the first theorization of the culture of modernity in terms of sensationalistic "shocks." Taken as a macrotext, moreover, the journal shows how the juxtaposition of sensational literature, which questioned the dominant values of the time, and non-fiction, which was published in the same magazine issue, created a new, proto-cinematic form of textuality, constructing narrative and intellectual cogency through and beyond the fragmentation of its constituent parts perceived in sequence. I shall also exemplify how this new form of textuality came to be by highlighting the narrative and iconographic continuum between magic lantern shows and periodical literature.