

**WestminsterResearch**

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>

**Book Review: Seeing by Electricity: The Emergence of Television,  
1878-1939**

**Wyver, J.**

This is an author formatted version of the following article: Wyver, J. 2020. Book Review: Seeing by Electricity: The Emergence of Television, 1878-1939. *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies*. 15 (4), pp. 426-428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749602020951653a> . The final definitive version is available from the publisher Sage at:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1749602020951653a>

© The Author(s) 2020

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

Doron Galili, **Seeing by Electricity: The Emergence of Television, 1878-1939**, Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2020; 264 pp.: ISBN 9781478007722, \$99.95 (hbk), ISBN 9781478008224, \$25.95 (pbk), ISBN 9781478009221 (e-book)

Reviewed by: John Wyver, University of Westminster, UK

Doron Galili's book is not a history of the cinema, although he begins with Louis Lumière. In 1935 the pioneer filmmaker spoke about television, and the emerging medium's 'connection with the inventions and applications which preceded it' (1). Such links are central to Galili's exploration of the intimately entwined histories of film and what he chooses to characterise not simply as television but rather as 'moving image transmission'. His subject is the *idea* of such transmission through to 1939, and the ways in which variants of that idea were expressed in cinema as well as in literature, journalism, experimental science and the manifestoes of the modernist avant-garde. Embracing a 'multiplicity of possibilities'(9) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the identity of what came to be called 'television' was far from fixed as the broadcast mass-medium that later seemed so clear and certain. Moreover, framing his subject as 'the history of moving image transmission' (6) facilitates Galili's revelatory discussions of television's links with the histories of electrification, of the telegraph, telephone and related signal communication systems, and of technological networks.

*Seeing by Electricity* is a major contribution to the rapidly developing field of media archaeology. Galili pays appropriate obeisance to theorists including Siegfried Zielinski and Mary Ann Doane, but he grounds his arguments firmly in deeply researched historical accounts of optical devices and electrical instruments, conceptions of vision, imperial fantasies and utopian imaginaries. In the most general terms, his aim is to detail 'the correspondences between the moving image and the historical processes of modernization in a broader, more ambivalent manner than is typically acknowledged.' (4) In this, and more, Galili succeeds with aplomb.

Following an expertly integrated introduction to the historiography of early television, the first third of the book takes on a range of diverse affiliations of moving image transmission before any credible instrumental form for the notion. Variants of telegraphy and the telephone are considered alongside seeing-at-a-distance in the science fiction of, among others Albert Robida and Edward Bellamy, and the imaginings of extended optic nerves roaming the modern world to witness its wonders.

In chapter 3, Galili surveys a number of nearly-television devices circulating around the turn into the twentieth century, including Polish inventor Jan Szczepanik's 'telectroscope', announced for the 1900 Paris World Fair. Despite this not appearing as promised, the advance press coverage underpins discussion of a key theme of the book: the various claims for the distinct ontologies of film and television. Notions of 'liveness' and 'immediacy' were suggested to define the essence of Szczepanik's apparatus against the emergent cinema, just as they were employed to legitimise the supposed unique qualities of actually existing television in the years before and after World War Two.

The ontological discussion remains important as *Seeing by Electricity* moves into the experimental era of television in the 1920s and '30s, when cinema and television were being increasingly shaped by economics, conglomerates jostling for control, and government legislation. Galili traces the development of the default idea of television as being constituted by network broadcasting, domestic reception, live transmission and a low-resolution screen aesthetic, but he stresses that this dominant form was far from inevitable.

US television's connections and cross-overs with radio interests and the Hollywood studios have been dug into before by scholars including Douglas Gomery and William Boddy. Here, Galili extends this work with case studies of hybrid projects involving the conjunction of film and electronic moving image transmission such as the experimental broadcasts by Charles Francis Jenkins of filmed silhouette dramas and the showing from 1933 onwards of full length motion pictures, initially without a soundtrack, by the Don Lee Broadcasting System in Los Angeles. Detailed technical history, however, as well as textual analysis of what little we know of the earliest programming are acknowledged as the provinces of others.

With Richard Koszarski, Galili is the co-author of the invaluable online database, *Television in the Cinema Before 1939*, which identifies movies, documentaries and animations featuring imagined variants of television. *Seeing by Electricity* includes productive close readings of sequences in several of these, including the 1912 French drama *Amour et science (Love and Science)* and the low-budget Republic Pictures thriller *S.O.S. Tidal Wave* (1939). Of the latter's climactic scene, for example, Galili argues that its intermedial and intertextual references 'undermine the idea of liveness... as an ontological property of television. Instead, [the film] shows that liveness is an effect of a particular set of media practices.' (143)

The concluding third of the book shifts the focus from industrial interests to the modernist avant-garde, focusing first on the utopian ideas of mass media developed by the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov and then on film theorist Rudolph Arnheim's conceptions of the (non-)identity of

television. Valuable in themselves, these detailed considerations might have benefitted from a tighter integration into the trajectory of the earlier chapters.

Among the admirable qualities of *Seeing by Electricity* are the author's pellucid prose and a measured respect for theory that is never over-burdening. Although Galili roams across the histories of moving image transmission in Britain, France, Germany and the Soviet Union, the book is primarily concerned with developments in the United States. In Britain the history of moving image transmission prior to the 1953 Coronation remains dominated by the writings of technology historians like R.W. Burns and by the institution-focussed accounts of Asa Briggs. Galili indicates just how many other intermedial narratives there are to research, and how much more of the meshes of modernity they can encompass, while at the same time equipping us wonderfully well to begin those chronicles.

#### References

*Amour et science* (1912) M. J. Roche. Gonda Raben.

Koszarski R and Galili D (2016) [Television in the Cinema Before 1939](https://journals.dartmouth.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/Journals.woa/1/xmlpage/4/article/471) An International Annotated Database. *The Journal of e-Media Studies* Volume 5 Issue 1. Available at: <https://journals.dartmouth.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/Journals.woa/1/xmlpage/4/article/471>

*S.O.S. Tidal Wave* (1939) John H Auer. Republic Pictures.